FIELDS AND BATTLEFIELDS

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FIELDS AND BATTLEFIELDS

CHAPTER I

THE TOWN

"My eyes I lend to you, but not my heart."
Old Play.

THE town of Bailleul stands upon a hill and may be seen over your shoulder for a two days' march, but the town of Steenwerk lies below on the plain of Flanders and peers above the orchards and willow trees surrounding it. Bailleul is a centre of gaiety.[1] Bands play of a Sunday afternoon in the market-place, Charlie Chaplin is seen every night by crowded audiences in the Y.M.C.A. Cinema, and the correct incidental music is provided. There are, or were, concerts every evening at the Caisse d'Epargne. All the important journals—*La Vie Parisienne, The Cambridge Magazine, The Listening Post, John Bull, The Feathered World*—can be borrowed or bought; and English beer can be found in limited quantities. Also an English soldier once chose a wife among the daughters of Bailleul and married her: yet it is not of Bailleul but of Steenwerk that I wish to write.

There was a time when Steenwerk set herself to

[1] Written before the German offensive of 1918. It is feared these towns are now in ruins.

rival in gaiety her sister on the hill. It was during the tenancy of the market-place by some Motor Transport men of great originality and enterprise. There was no regular brigade band on Sundays, but these talented ones could render the opening bars of The Rosary on the horns of their motor-lorries. They set up a cinema of their own and worked it themselves; they assembled an orchestra of one man and two or three instruments, but the instruments did not long survive. Concerts were given at which R.A.M.C. men sang, and if marriages were not made in Steenwerk that was nobody's fault.

For in our own phrase there were "beaucoup Mamselles" in Steenwerk. I recall as sweet a vision as any of its kind. Once on entering the town I passed a young person wearing a red dress and apron. She carried water pails slung over her firm shoulders and walked in spite of them with the grace of perfect simplicity, or of perfect art. She did not raise her eyes. Her face was pale—a maid pale in the spring. Doubtless she thought of no khaki soldier but of one in cornflower blue, with perhaps a coffee-mill of hers in his pack, a red sash round his waist, and eyes more eloquent than ours.

Yet Steenwerk, little city of the plain, thou art ever remembered not for youth, pleasure, nor therewith any morals to be drawn, but because from thy precincts we first looked back to England from a land at war.

In Steenwerk we first became European. But it was from the old we chiefly learned our lessons.

A good soldier is always learning lessons, if not

from his military duties, then from his civil duties. Having cut himself off from the ties and obligations of common life, he is the more bound in honour to observe them in others. It is also his inclination to do so. In the army, although " no expressions of sentiment are allowed," this is but a confession of weakness. *La vie militaire* is above all *la vie sentimentale.* For sentiment we enlisted, we live, we die, and until the sentiment called Liberty is become a fact of this world, armies—those quixotic bands—will continue to exist. And while we endure the isolation of army life sentiment alone saves us.

Thus Sergeant Booky proposed to French ladies once a month. When questioned on the subject he replied, " Practice makes perfect." He had a song of his own for sympathetic occasions—

" Almong soldar no bong,
Anglay soldar tout sweet."

This, when sung to an effective tender tune, had made great impressions. French women understand these matters very well, but sometimes their cursed native realism makes itself felt. Thus Booky to my knowledge received something like a *coup de grâce* on one occasion. We were together in an estaminet when he opened the kind of conversation that led up to a proposal. The lady was something beyond youth in years, in person both motherly and attractive, with rosy cheeks and brown eyes. She stood at her stove adding more coffee into the coffee-pot which sat on the fire day and night all the year round. She waited, listening to Booky, and stirred the pot as she listened. A

man wearing corduroys sat near by smoking a clay pipe and spitting solemnly at intervals into the hearth. The conversation reached the stage at which the proposer said, "*Voulez-vous aimer, desirer, aller promenarder avec moi?*" Others joined in. The lady of the estaminet replied to some one else as well as to Booky, "*Mais oui, deux œufs, anglay beaucoup promenard.*" Then Booky said, "*Avez-vous un mari à la guerre ou voulez-vous moi?*" At which the lady looked at him with arched brows for a moment in silence, then as to herself she remarked, "*Mais c'est un enfant,*" and continued to look at Booky in a disconcerting fashion as though she was comparing his height and probable weight to that of her own little boy of the same age. Some time after this I received a commission from Booky, when I was about some shopping on a large scale, to buy him a tube of pomard hongroise for his moustache.

But Mack, who like myself preferred serious to tender conversation, discovered the watchmaker of Steenwerk and advised me to make his acquaintance. I did so on a later occasion.

The watchmaker of Steenwerk lived in the smallest shop in Europe, so small indeed that the shop window contained only his head and beard. From outside we peered through at him as though we were visitors at the Zoo, at the cage of a small bear. The shop within was so low that a man of ordinary height had to bend his head. Not more than two customers could occupy the shop at one time. Monsieur the watchmaker sat in his window,

but he could serve at his counter by turning in his chair. When you entered he would unscrew the magnifying glass from his eye, take one or two keys and cog-wheels out of his beard and replace them carefully on his table, turn half round, and then call for Marie his wife. "Please, Monsieur," said he to the customer, "be careful of my counter; it was broken and I had it mended, and then but the other day *un ecossais* leaned upon it, a weighty man, and you see it is again broken. Marie, here is one who wants *deux aiguilles*—it is not possible."

Monsieur had very small soft hands. He was a great craftsman and known all over France for his knowledge of clocks and watches, not only of modern but also of the ancient makes. He told me this himself on one occasion and added, "I am a man of education." Monsieur believed that the war would by then have been over if Jaurés had not been *abîmé* by the traitors. But whatever the plight of France, over which he was complaisantly tragic, it was well for Monsieur and his business that Madame Marie, his wife, had not met with the fate of Jaurés. He called for her every two minutes, whether for his spectacles mislaid beyond his immediate range of vision, whether for some tiny tool of his craft, or for the smoking lamp, or more often to soften some soldier customer whose watch had been overlooked for too many weeks. At the sound of her name she appeared noiselessly as a ghost, through a half-closed door, and was at his side at once scolding and explaining softly. She had a white pasty face but with sprightly eyes, and

she always wore a pink square garment. She had an air of having grown old indoors and of knowing her shop as an oyster its shell. She had also a kind of mother-of-pearl beauty composed of soft shades of patience, gentleness, and hope. She never despaired in her mediations. She would enter to find a customer come after his watch—some stolid youth in khaki, standing gloomily before her husband who rallied him for being impatient, *mondain*, for not considering the political and economic conditions of France, for not respecting the good faith of the educated craftsman. Then Madame Marie, having already overheard the customer's request from behind the door, lost no time in words but took out her order-book and bent her head down to the page. The customer in reply to his own shortcomings would say, "But we're likely marching to-morrow, Mister. You've had it a fortnight and you said it would take you *doo joo*, two days—never mind a pal of mine's what you've lost altogether." Fortunately, neither side fully understood the other, and as Monsieur would often end his discourse with a sweet and childish smile across his beard, it was difficult to be angry with him. Madame Marie would then lay the order-book before him on top of all the tools and cog-wheels, and together they would move their fingers up and down the columns. Two pairs of spectacles and two pairs of sorely-tried old eyes were exercised to decipher their own writing. At last, after infinite discussion, a number would be agreed upon, while the customer sank into a deeper gloom.

Then three or four little packages tied up with string would be routed out as likely to be the missing watch, two of which—Mon Dieu—had the same number upon them. But then after all the thing was explained. On one package some one had written Corporal Tom-Tom, and was not the customer's name Corporal Thompson? and the watch after all has been waiting for him for more than a week.

When you emerge from the smallest shop in Europe it is likely that you may have an *idée fixe* about a drink. You can get a glass of citrôn opposite, and a slice of *pain d'épice*, but you will have to eat and drink standing up with your head in a cloud of fancy aprons hanging from the ceiling. But if you are an "old soldier" you will turn to your right up the main street and go into Le Cerf estaminet for the purpose of drinking French beer.

Now it is fairly well known that old soldiers never die.

"Old soldiers nevER die,
They fade away."

But it may be worth while to hear about one who did die, and to hear it in the proper setting, for the story was going about at that time fresh from the mint. Le Cerf is a long low room fitted with little tables and decorated with hand-painted hunting scenes in panels along the walls. The hunting scenes were in greens and browns. The animals represented were full of vigour and set off by little churches and houses in the background. It is a hot sultry evening. The place is crowded and is filled with smoke. Beer lies in little pools on the

floor, or on the tables. Conversation of all kinds in many different dialects is heard on all sides. But here is a group dominated by a single speaker. He is obviously an old soldier by his hard-bitten face and round black eyes like two plums in a plum pudding, and although he tolerates his younger listeners he addresses his conversation to another of the same breed, but of the silent variety, who reclines upon the chair immediately in front of him. At supreme moments in his conversation the speaker will throw his remarks into the form of a question. But this is only for effect. No reply is desired or expected, and the reclining one opposite opens his mouth only for the purpose of admitting beer, occasionally nodding his head sagaciously.

These Falstaffs understand each other perfectly. The younger listeners, members of a new degenerate army, may learn lessons if they wish. The theme of the conversation was the base quality of malt liquors as supplied by the French. " You can get stout 'ere," said the speaker, glaring at one of the painted panels on the wall, " but it's *now good, it's now good.* 'Ere 'ave I been 'avin' a one, a t'other, or a 'alf-and-'alf off the bloomin' reel waitin' for them blinkin' 'ounds to catch that alleluia stag these two hours, but I dunno, that bloke in a mess jacket wiv a chase-me fevver on his 'ead won't let 'em slip, 'e won't. No, chum—this ain't a Christian country for no Christian war wiv no drink you'd give the 'oly name of beer ter. And some of our orfficers they'r that innocent they couldn't lead a little child down a garden path. They couldn't

—not a little child—they wants to get a rope bloody ladder and climb straight up to 'eaven—some of 'em. They do straight. On my life. Why, there's some of 'em will talk to yer like a farver fust and then 'ave it you're drunk arter. I've said to some of 'em, I've said . . .

"Why, there's some of 'em never seen our lads boozed in this flamin' country at all; they can't do it. *I* know for a bloody fact they can't." Here the speaker leaned forward breathing beer upon us and sending his round brown eyes right and left as if in alarm of spies.

"Now you mayn't belee what I'm goin' to say, but if you'll belee me it's the gorspel truth. Did you know Charley Crabtree in the Corps in the old days? Makeweight Charley they called 'im 'cause he knew wot corpses made up to after P.M.s. You knew 'im—he was post-mortem orderly—no one could beat him at that job out in Africa wot with the flies and the heat and the corpses and one thing and another, but blimey he could drink like a fish. *I* never seen any one like him. Well, out 'ere he was Corporal Crabtree! At the beginning of this 'ere war he put up two stripes on his own, and his South Africa ribbon, and 'listed. Of course he were no chicken, and they were glad to 'ave him in Aldershot in September. But out 'ere! Lord lummy he didn't half carry on! He couldn't do with this beer. *Of course* he wouldn't of come over if he'd a known, he'd 'ave arranged otherwise, 'cause he was fifty-two *I* knew for a bloody fact. But if you'll belee me it took 'im so bad—his not

getting drunk and one thing and another, all along of this 'ere beer, and mind he'd left no stone unturned, that he vowed he'd get boozed if he took all day over it. Stripes! He didn't mind about his stripes. 'The Lord gave and the Lord may take 'em away,' he used to say. Well, one day he cut all parades. He knew what he were in for. Stayed away all bloomin' day. Of course he knew of a little house on the quiet where he'd fixed it up. His unit were in rest at the time. He stayed away all day and did the thing pukker. And he must have put some away, too, for I knew Makeweight Charley wot he could put away. But could he get boozed on this baptising liquor? . . . Could he?" . . .

Here the speaker sat back in his chair and, turning his head slowly, gave us a kind of foreshortened glare, expressive of the fiercest scorn.

"Could he?" he shouted.

Then bending forward again suddenly he continued—

"And what riled him most—this was from wot I heard after. There were two cooks knew where he were, silly bloody fellers who'd get boozed on their own tea, and they got blindo and wanted to take him back to billets with 'em singin' and carryin' on.

"But he wouldn't go with 'em, he wouldn't. Walked back by hisself and give hisself up to the guard sober as a gent. Yus.

"And if you'll belee me he died in the night of a broken 'eart.

"They called it V.D.H., but *I* knew better. But——"

And here the speaker leaned forward again, and held us with his eyes.

"*Only think what he'd been through.*"

But to reflect properly on the enormity of this and other tragedies, let us leave that wan beery atmosphere and its clink of glasses and continue our way up the main street. Perhaps the salient guns can be heard and you may overhear one officer's servant confide an important rumour to another. Through the press of men, N.C.O.s, interpreters and others, a staff motor-car hoots its way impatiently. It is a relief to find some place of quiet. There are several little shops facing the street with shop windows, but apparently no doors. The way to enter one is to choose a hall-door near by, open it, descend some steps and open one of several doors until you find the proper parlour. Here you may buy picture post-cards, Menier chocolate, Sunlight soap, embroidered aprons, Euthymol, chocolate *pralinés*, beetroot sugar, and shaving soap. In these little parlours some conversation with your hostess will often bring a hundred friendly qualities to light. In a back room you may be treated to coffee in a china bowl and stir it in a blessed silence while you look out on a strip of back garden where vegetables grow in neat rows. In this haven, forgetful of time, you may watch Madame polishing the rails of her stove, or having undressed her child hold

him upon her lap and repeat, sentence by sentence, a little Latin prayer. A chain clock on the wall ticks out the hours convenient to eating, sleeping and praying. The great stream of Life underflowing the gnat-like gyrations of men is revealed for a moment; and for a moment you, too, may dip in it and ease all thought, all baneful flutterings.

At the end of the main street is the market-place through which men are now strolling back to billets. The tall Gothic church occupies most of the square, and around it the big transport lorries are lined, wheel to wheel. Along one side of the square there runs a little river, beyond which are small gardens, and the houses of prosperous citizens. Each house has a private bridge across the river. At seven o'clock every evening the priest crosses one of these bridges on his way to church, and presently some women in black and little girls follow him in. There are many of us who will not forget the first time we, too, pushed open the red baize door and entered a French church. Outside, at that hour, hurrying men's feet, noise, laughter and the sound of a mouth-organ. An early star shines down upon the scene, one of many such little vortices of men and their intentions to be found at that moment all over Europe. But within, candlelight and the soft noise of Aves. The women kneel before their shrines; the children go hand in hand from one saint to another down the aisles. The priest beckons to the confessional, a figure rises and follows. Here also is a pageant, also one of many to be found at that moment all over Europe.

Consider it well. It is not unrelated to that other noisy pageant outside. Indeed, without this within, perhaps that outside would be impossible. Outside we are soldiers, politicians, drinkers, journalists, blowers of mouth-organs, all of us eternally engaged in fighting, in interpreting, in inflicting wounds, in binding them up, in sacrificing ourselves, in all forms of quixotism, which we are pleased to call reality. Within, Humanity eternally compensating itself for its own follies, already united in a community of sorrow.

The red baize door swings to behind us again. The pleasant reassuring noise and spectacle again present themselves. And we—are we not the van of the common men of Great Britain enlisting in their hundred thousands? Are we not the first of Kitchener's Army? Shall we, too, swirl and vanish and leave no trace? Perish the thought. It is ever important to remember one's own importance. What great things are already whispered by officers' servants and other persons *who really know*. And Italy has just joined the Allies. The war will be over in three months or four. "Which way to the Divisional Rest Station, chum? Turn to your right at the end of the square and you'll find the flag on your left. Good-night."

CHAPTER II

THE CONVENT

"What is *pourquoi*? . . .
I would I had bestowed that time in the tongues
That I have in fencing, dancing and bear-baiting."
Twelfth Night.

In the days of yore, in peace time, the convent was occupied by nuns who led a holy life and, with other ministrations, kept a school for girls. But even before our day they had all departed. The school was closed to pupils, and nothing remained except the images of saints on brackets, texts and pictures of the Sacred Heart which hung on the walls. The convent buildings were not in themselves old, yet they retained an ancient atmosphere among their fruit trees. They were divided from each other by little paddocks and vegetable gardens. We had arrived one evening in May after a march of twenty miles or more, and when we fell out I and others sat down in one of these little paddocks and leaned our backs against an apple tree. A faint old-world odour greeted us, pigeons flapped their wings upon the tiled roofs, a cat jumped over the wall. Hither we had come from England—by sea, by train, and on our own feet: and rested here and not elsewhere.

But the place had soon become the scene of

incredible labours, for the divisional sick to the number of fifty had here to be accommodated, and "old-world odours" were not appreciated by medical science. Wards, receiving-room, isolation wards, pack store, dispensary, bath-house, quartermaster's stores, cook-houses and billets for the ambulance, had all to be organised out of a number of detached buildings of one and two stories in height, all of which communicated with each other through courts and round paved corners in a bewildering way. The orderly sergeant had to rise fully five minutes before his wont in order to thread this labyrinth before reveille.

Of all the rôles picturesquely filled, in that our first Divisional Rest Station, I recall that of Peter G., the bath orderly, as the most romantic. He and his tubs found themselves in a pleasant vine-house, a brick floor beneath them, and the vines above them hanging from the glass roof. He heated his water at a copper and himself sat upon a tub under a large statue of the Madonna, who presided over the company from a high pedestal, her head wreathed in vine leaves. Peter G. was an Irishman and a Catholic, and knew how to respect the Madonna. He marshalled his patients at the proper times and moved between their naked bodies through the steamy twilight of his realm with a grave and deliberate air, and with a sense of mystery. Peter had known many jobs in his time and had visited many places on his two feet before the war, but this job appealed to all the complexities of his nature. Here he was at once

priest, medicine man, stoker of fires, stern usher, collector of tales, sanitary expert, and *penseur*; and was, moreover, left very much under his own orders as far as his particular duties were concerned.

Patients for admission to hospital came first into the receiving- and casualty-room, which had formerly been a schoolroom of the convent. It was large and airy, and had a floor of black and white tiles. The patients sat in a row under a large text, "*Laissez venir à moi les petits enfants.*" Here one morning I found myself on duty. I collected the sick reports from the patients and arranged them in order for the M.O., who stood in a *dégagé* way at his desk at a suitable distance. The steriliser shone in the sun, and a scrubbed table supported such implements as a thermometer in a vase of carbolic, a tongue depressor, a case of dental instruments. The Primus stove roared softly in a corner, and Harry E. with another orderly were already at work dressing boils and applying foments. I collected a new sick report and waited for the M.O. to initial the last. The patients were not, as a rule, suffering from severe complaints, but to the uninitiated in those early days many of them appeared quite serious enough. I frequently envied the calm of the M.O., who, though no older than myself, had many years' experience of out-patients behind him. This calm I noticed grew more pronounced when the patient gave us a series of those dark and baffling symptoms so distressing to the ear of sympathy.

"Next patient," and a robust-looking youth came forward.

"What's your trouble?" said the M.O., without looking at him.

No answer. The patient opened his mouth. He had probably not heard the question, owing to the noise of the Primus stove.

"What's your *trouble?*". The M.O. turned round and allowed his professional eyes to dwell upon the case.

"Please, sir, I have shooting pains from my right kidney to my left tentacle—and all over——"

For myself I believed the man already as good as dead, but the M.O. did not seem to be startled.

"How long have you been like this?"

"Please, sir, I felt it come on last Wednesday, but then it was in my knees." The M.O. put one hand behind the patient and with the other gave him a friendly dig in the stomach.

"Do you feel that?"

"No, sir."

"Have you a sore throat? Show me your tongue."

The patient tried to speak and put out his tongue at the same time. A strange gulp was the result.

But the M.O. appeared suddenly to rouse himself from meditation and banged his fist on the desk.

"A good purge, orderly. Ol ricini an ounce and a half and let him rest a bit in the mortuary. Next patient."

The mortuary, so called, was a nice room next door, not often used for corpses at that time.

Sometimes the nature of the purge was left to the N.C.O. or to the orderly, who had to choose between three then commonly in use. Sparky, who was a corporal in those days, had a method of his own for deciding the suitability of a purge for a given patient.

"Let's see, you want a purge? What's your religion?"

"C. of E., Corporal."

Then Sparky would repeat to himself an empirical formula—

> "Presbyterian—Number nine.
> R.C.—Calomels three.
> Church of England—Castor oil."

This was a case of *showing initiative* on Sparky's part. If religions have a column to themselves in A and D books, on sick reports and ward-sheets, why not, he argued, connect them up with reality in some suitable manner? But this Church and State method which we adopted from Sparky once brought me into a very singular situation.

One morning a motor transport sergeant appeared in the receiving-room with a sick report all to himself. He explained his symptoms loftily, but he did not greatly impress the M.O. on duty. He was awarded a homely remedy. Now, as his religion was correctly noted down R.C., it followed that three little tablets of calomel would meet his case. These he took, believing them to be something soothing, and other than what Nature designed, and departed again to his motor lorries in the

market-place. The day passed for me in an ordinary way. The Primus stove required attention; some equipment that rightfully belonged to ordnance pannier A was found lurking in ordnance pannier C, and had to be restored; I read a little in the book I had begun in England; the M.O. gave me some *thoughts on varicose veins;* an excitement occurred over a cup of tea made with tea tablets, which were a novelty in those days. Yes, the day was an ordinary one. Sparky came on duty after tea and I went out for a walk. My steps led me past the church, and following my destiny, I entered. The usual quiet scene presented itself. Three widows knelt in a row telling their beads. But my attention was attracted to the fine western gallery supporting the organ, from whence came sounds of some one very busily hammering and also of an occasional organ note. I found the turret leading to the gallery and ascended it. The hammering came from the centre of the organ. A man in khaki stood in front of it staring into the pipes.

I stared likewise.

"He's a-mending of it," said the man.

"I hope he knows about organs," I said. But my words produced a terrible effect. The hammering ceased a moment and a face peered through the pipes full of rage. I did not recognise the face at first, but caught a kind of association in the words that followed.

Thus spake the organ: "Blimey if that ain't the bloke that gim me them three little blinkin'

tablets this morning." Bang—bang—crash. "Upset me more than if I'd swallowed all Sankey and Moody. I didn't want a purge—told yer I didn't want a purge. Wot d'yer think I've got an inside like this 'ere organ not played on for ten years then?" Here an eight-foot pipe roared deafeningly: "Wot d'yer call yerselves?" Bang. "Call yerselves Medicals?" Bang. Crash. "You and yer orfficer. D'yer know what I'd call yer? I'd call yer *C. C. sharp*, a mob of blinkin' stomach plumbers. Wait till I get this vox humana mended and I'll let yer know—what—I'd call—yer——"

The face through the pipes, the fury and grotesqueness of the creature, the suddenness of the onslaught, took me completely by surprise. I was unable to reply. I cast in my mind for some explanation. It seemed as if I had encountered one of those malicious spirits said to haunt sacred edifices in the Middle Ages: known and pacified by our gothic ancestors with statues of griffins, gargoyles and the like. But certainly it needed some assuagement here or the widows below would be disturbed and the souls of their husbands lack prayers. But presently the spirit extracted itself in some mysterious fashion from the organ. Then I recognised the motor transport sergeant who had reported sick that morning. Certainly his face had a meagre, gargoyle expression.

But I remained silent before him. How could I explain?

"R.C.—calomels three," I repeated to myself.

But I felt he would not understand. I stood with bowed head waiting for the storm.

But apart from his organ body he appeared to be of a less tumultuous nature. His next words were gently uttered, and he seemed softened. "Mending organs is my 'obby," he said. "I got an afternoon off owing to you and turned my attention to this." He laid his hand lovingly on the manuals. "I've promised to mend it for the priest. It's not been played on for ten years, as I remarked before, but it's not a bad instrument."

"I am interested in organs myself," I said.

After that we were friends and entered into conversation. He told me to return the following evening at six o'clock and that he would then play to me. I left the church musingly, and with a sense of the mystery of circumstances.

But there were other medicines administered in the receiving-room besides the three I have mentioned. Most of the ailments were homely ailments and needed homely remedies. Dover's powder tablets was a favourite one. We, the helots of medical science, understood from our masters that if a Dover's powder tablet failed of one remedy it had still a fair chance of hitting one of two others. There must have been the wisdom of the ages in this, for I have known Dover's powders cure an astonishing variety of ills. That receiving-room was, after all, a very useful schooling for much that was to follow after. There we first learnt how to take the *scientific attitude* to patients

when necessary. That is, we learnt to remember on occasions that if a patient is left to himself and to Nature he may get better, and if he gets worse he goes down the line in a few hours to where he may have better luck further on. In later times, when over two thousand casualties would come through a single ambulance station in twenty-four hours, the scientific attitude became a necessary requirement of the mind; and when the turn came to some of us, in the destinies of war, to play the patient ourselves, we recognised the *scientific attitude* in the eyes of others with more misgivings, perhaps, but without recriminations.

Patients who were marked Medicine and Duties returned to their units, those who were admitted to hospital were first entered with all proper detail in the A and D book and were then directed to the pack store where they left all but personal belongings, and their clothes. The pack store was another of the convent schoolrooms, with a map of La Patrie, if I remember aright, and another picture of the Sacred Heart, that anatomy of melancholy, hanging upon its walls. From the pack store they would walk to the main hall of the schools to be received into the sick ward, where big Sergeant Harry received them gravely and again entered them up with all proper particulars in his ward book. A stretcher bed, a pair of flannel pyjamas, and a couple of army blankets awaited them.

In the day-time patients could stroll about, smoke cigarettes, and sleep in the May sunshine.

The little vegetable gardens were planted with the greenest of vegetables on the blackest of soils. The gravel courts and paved yards were honeycombed underneath with water tanks and cesspits, which lay side by side and were often of vast extent. A number of ancient pumps communicated with this under-world. Hence an ingredient of the old-world odour, and in this connection we had reason to recall the remark of a famous traveller: "The people of this land put statues of the saints over their wells to protect them from the pest, but since they dig middens alongside of them, their prayers are not always answered."

Behind the convent buildings lay a fine orchard where the waggons were packed and the transport horses picketed. Here the A.S.C. men had their bivouacs under the apple trees, here the blacksmith laboured at his little forge, and the orderly who sterilised blankets carried on his beneficent work at the steam-heater. We had a legend that a spy had once been apprehended from the orchard. He was observed at the other side of the hedge ploughing the same furrow again and again and listening to what the army blankets were telling each other before they were put into the steam-heater and rendered silent.

But the citadel of the convent was the house of Madame H., who performed the duties of caretaker, and whose parlour was entered from the convent yard. She lived with other little ladies all dressed in black and all connected by family

ties. Her kitchen and parlour were used by us as a canteen. All day long the making of coffee, the boiling of eggs, the serving of men at the round table, the washing of dishes, the scrubbing of floors, continued in these small apartments. Yet at all times the place was neat and tidy and the rails of the stove shone brightly. On the wall of the parlour there hung three pictures—Millet's "Angelus," the portrait of an eminent cardinal, and a lithograph of a battle in the suburbs of Paris in 1870. In the evening there was always a crowd of men at the round table eating boiled eggs and *petits pains*. The basket containing the *petits pains* had often to be sent round a second or third time to the *boulangerie* to be filled. We learnt our first lessons in French at this table, and here a wit of our ambulance had remarked, "An œuf is as good as a feast."

If goodness, gentleness, and virtue could make a duchess, Madame H. was such. She dressed in black serge, she was short, her face was red with cooking, yet she was truly dignified. The other ladies who lived with her also wore black serge. They were no shorter than she, indeed one was quite tall and gracious, but they were all secondary to Madame. When, in her turn, she brought in the casserole or poured the coffee, the procedure was different, it had more weight. The sugar was placed on the table by her with more *empressement*, and although she might utter no word, the men at table felt impressed.

This dignity was never impaired by continual

contact with her customers, who came in at all hours of the day and would often crowd round the stove and make cooking very difficult. But her manners were never disturbed and she had always her little joke. There was no Englishman she could not laugh at, but no one ever laughed at her. Only after a hard day at serving, after rising early and attending an early Mass, she would joke less, but be more courteous than ever. When she spoke to us, she always enunciated very slowly and distinctly, as though she hoped by that means to capture our slow understanding. In the same hope she would repeat her phrases carefully to us as though to an infant class. "Monsieur—a—déjà —eu—deux—petits—pains—Monsieur—aime— beaucoup—les—petits—pains—bien—cuits."

These ladies and many hundreds of Frenchwomen adopted the English soldier and spent their whole life cooking, serving, washing and sewing for him. Many did so as a means of livelihood, but many also for quite unselfish reasons: and no one will ever know what gentle *affaires du cœur* have lain hidden, among a variety of motives, often perfectly concealed by a frank friendship and concern. Madame herself had had her weakness. The man she ever remembered had been quartered at the convent schools some months before, and on one occasion she asked me to translate a miserable scrawl he had sent her. I had found great difficulty in rendering into French the stereotyped phrase with which he opened, "I hope you are in the pink as it leaves me at present."

"J'espère que vous êtes dans la rose——"

"J'espère que vous vous rougissez comme il me laisse——"

I had finally to give up the attempt and adopt a base paraphrase. But shall I ever forget the letter of sweetness, wit and piety she addressed to him in return? She wrote on every second line of the page and desired me to insert the English. After that one letter of his, he sent her scarce anything but a field post-card, although on occasions his wife would write to Madame in friendly terms.

At last the time came for us to leave Steenwerk, and one evening we marched away along a southern road under summer leaves. I did not see the little town again for nearly a year, but then when the chance came I called at the convent schools to revisit Madame H. She received me as a guest and made profound inquiries. Many ambulances had come and gone and still her round table was supplied with hungry men. She laid a hand on my shoulder and said, "Ce—Monsieur—aime—beaucoup—les—pet—its—pains—bien—cuits."

As she did so I realised again those strange early sensations of our first weeks of active service, when thoughts of home were still with us and the higher savagery of war was not yet learnt. On leaving I took occasion to inquire after the man whose letter I had once translated. Madame stood in shadow at the door. She laid her hand on her heart and spoke politely, but without expression. He had not written anything to her for a long while,

and then it had been only a field post-card. Yes, she had had a letter from his wife—" une lettre assez complaisante." Evidently he was forgetting.

She bade me farewell at the opened door, and herself gave me instructions how to cross the market square.

O women of France, humble in estate yet proud and mysterious, you who have by nature all the courtesies of the human heart, who seem to leave by comparison only appetites to other nations, how long shall we remember lessons first learnt from you? You have found in the English soldier a true quality of purity, you have taken him to your heart and are rewarded by " une lettre assez complaisante " from his wife.

CHAPTER III

FESTUBERT

THE CHURCHYARD

"What age! What shattered earth! What blinded eyes
Of Heaven, as at a sight too sick to endure!
What more hath heart to hope, hath soul to lure!
Here Desolation in his kingdom dies.
Here men have wept, here prayed, here made surmise
Of God, and lo! their bones lie naked, pure,
In ghastly resurrection premature,
'Nêath yonder Christus pleading at the skies.
But Nature, equal-hearted to her kind—
How sways she here? Look where yon shell-hole deep
Has made a grave for graves—you there shall find
The twisted rose in bloom, blue larkspur peep,
Pale evening primrose and convolvulus—
In token of indifference to us."[2]

WHEN at a remote point of time we shall look back at the 1915 front, some of us will think of Ypres with its bath-rooms exposed to view on first floors, some of the chocolate truffles to be bought in Armentières, some of the quarries and prairie of the field of Loos, and some perhaps of Ploegsteert woods with their graves and primroses.

But for myself I shall think first of harvest time at Festubert.

Ypres was feared and hated, its spirit was wholly evil. It was whispered that sentries on silent nights had gone mad, listening to the slow dropping of bricks in the deserted streets. The spirit of

Armentières was conciliatory. Shells visited it respectfully, avoided cake-shops and left the active brewery in peace.

But Festubert was neither tragic nor burlesque. I recall its whole nature as operatic. Scenes, actors, costumes and situations were less in themselves than the score to which they were set; to the movement of the summer breeze through the willows, the humming of aeroplanes, the pizzicato of bullets, the chattering of swallows under deserted eaves, to the rich atmosphere of the land in harvest weather. The day seemed all afternoon, the night a meeting of two twilights. The whole was a quiet pastoral, to be followed at no great interval by the Walpurgis Dance of Loos.

Festubert, like other historical sectors, had its traditional fateful secret, its charnel beyond the waving reeds and overgrown apple trees. But it was not often alluded to, and by now may have faded from the recordless annals of the ranks. But a few weeks before the time of which I write, the Canadians had made a famous charge through Festubert orchard, and men still told each other the romantic story of "Private" Hardy and of his bombing exploit.

Our main dressing-station was situated at the point where houses, though still inhabited, ceased to have glass in the windows. It was a low one-storied building with a little garden in front of it where roses and candytuft grew. The house consisted of a large room used as a surgery and two smaller rooms opening out of it used for everything

else. From this main dressing-station we went forward every night to two advanced dressing-stations situated one at Festubert and one at La Plantin. Most of our work was done at night.

One afternoon I was treating the surgery with formalin to keep away the flies. Remarks and scraps of conversation came through the door from the next room where Staff-Sergeant Bill and Chatham the dresser were at some leisurely work before the afternoon meal. Two walking cases had come down to us that morning. Both were suffering from slight shell-shock. One had a few cuts about the head. The other was not wounded but appeared to be more unnerved than his companion. By now they had sufficiently recovered to sit in the next room and take an interest in passing events. I heard the voice of Bill: "You'll be all right, old flower, don't you worrit. By Chrise, he looks a proper Sandy, don't he."

The patient thus addressed, muttered something hopeful in reply, which led to a repetition of his story; of how "he and me" were standing in the queue for breakfast, nineteen of them in all with nineteen mess-tins waiting to be filled. Of how the shell—"a bloody big yen"—came too quick to dodge. Of how "he and me" seemed to be all that was left of the party, and in consequence had not felt like breakfast, and so had eaten nothing all day.

I noticed that Sandy alone contributed to these narratives. The other patient scarcely spoke at all.

"Tea's ready," called Archy, one of the dressers,

as he rushed in from the farmyard with the dixy. He was a round-faced, excitable youth who loved arguments. Tea-time was his hour.

For tea we sat round an old rickety table. The party consisted of the two patients, Staff-Sergeant Bill, Archy, Chatham the dresser, and myself.

" Bags," said Bill to me, " it's your turn up at Festubert to-night, ain't it? Don't forget to bring them water-bottles back, 'cause I'm told we're being relieved to-morrow; and while you're there don't forget to look at that sewing-machine, it's beyond the church to the right; you can't miss it, it lays in a bit of a yard. It just lays there. It's worth your while to see it."

" Why's he so interested in sewing-machines?" said Chatham in a low voice. He was a pale, refined-looking man who suffered from deafness. He was busy opening a jam tin for one of the patients.

" 'Cause it reminds him of home," said Archy mischievously. " You mustn't blame him though—we mustn't blame him—he's only a workin' lad——" Archy had to duck to avoid a heavy hand.

" So I am," said Bill, " and could eat three clerks like you before breakfast. Don't talk to me of clerks—sixteen shillings a week, bread and lard and a three-inch bloody collar."

At this the two patients giggled. The patient called Sandy had a bandage round his head which made his yellow hair stick out in queer tufts, and his freckled face was red from the heat; but he was rapidly resuming his good spirits.

Chatham, who was educated at Harrow and on all occasions preserved his gentle manners, was drinking his tea as though in a drawing-room. He now bent over to Sandy and said, " Are you feeling better? Yes—you were hit by a shell—yes. How was it? " Whereat Sandy told his story with confidence for the fourth time; and although Archy was shouting next his working ear, Chatham pretended to hear it all, as was his skilful custom.

" Subside, Archy, or go and have your tea with the cook."

The other patient, who had not been wounded, remained silent. His hands still shook and he seemed a little shy. He was younger than his companion, his face was childish and inexpressive. He had large blue eyes and his chin had down upon it. We tried to include him in the conversation. I suggested that perhaps the shell was one of the new boomerang shells which took back prisoners, Fritz's latest, and that the seventeen unaccounted for might therefore be considered safe. I was sorry the moment I had spoken. His face remained quite unemotional, but his eyes filled with tears.

" I couldna rightly say," he said.

We were all silent for a moment, and then Bill banged his fist on the table and said, " Well, there was some one lookin' after you, anyway. Wot I say is, you be thankful for your luck, my boys, both of you."

Silence.

" Yes, father," said Archy, jumping out of arms' reach.

"Not yow, yow kipper," said Bill savagely, "and yow get all them stretchers shifted when you've taken the dixy back, and look sharp about it." But Bill was always at a disadvantage after a meal; his fatherly instincts then expanded and shone in his face, and for a while the bully sergeant was submerged. Meanwhile Sandy had been talking to Chatham, and presently we were all listening.

"Have you heard about this, Bill?" I said—"an old trench captured a while back from the Germans, where there's still——"

But Sandy broke in to continue his own story. "I've never been there myself," he said. "We're not allowed over there. They say officers only may go and look in. . . . Of course, this is what I heard—see. . . . It's not filled in yet—see . . . the old trench—and there's an officer's dug-out there, and four dead Fritzies still playing cards. . . ."

"What—officers?"

"Aye. Four officers, and they're all yellow from lyddite. What they think is a lyddite shell must 'a burst in the dug-out and stiffened them. Anyway they're all yellow—faces, hands, uniform and all—and the last card turned up is the ace of spades."

"What were they playing, I wonder?"

"Don't know what they were playing, but there they are still sittin' round the table."

"Ow—bloody 'ell," said Bill.

"What's that?" said Archy, coming back into

the room and seeing every one's state of tension. But all were silent a moment.

" Nothin'," said Bill, " and yow get on with them stretchers—only four Fritzies sat round a table, yellow as 'ell and still playin' cards—now you fall on them stretchers or I'll fall on you. . . ."

" What? Where? " said Archy in an ecstasy of curiosity, but he was ruthlessly shut up, protesting and struggling, in the next room to sort his stretchers. Bill had his revenge.

He now bustled about, rubbing his hands and preparing for the night's work. " Chatham," said he, " see after Sandy's equipment and put him in the car comfortable, it'll be starting soon." Chatham nodded. We never knew whether he heard or divined his orders, but he always carried them out.

Sandy's companion, who had not been wounded, looked dumbly at Bill. What was to become of him? Evidently he was not going to be allowed to accompany his friend. Was he to go back to those trenches at once? He did not speak, but this must have passed through his mind. Bill went up to him. " You—I'll speak to the officer about you. You'd better sleep here the night and you'll be fit as a flea in the morning. Give you a stretcher and blankets and you'll get a good night's rest."

Chatham, finding himself at my side, made one of his low-voiced comments: " It's very hard on these boys—they're new to the game—what?—yes, look at him—he's a mere child; of course he'd

give his stars for a wound. . . ." After which he went up to Sandy and began helping him with his equipment.

About two hours later, in the gathering dusk, a little party of us prepared to start for night duty at Festubert. We fell in on the road in front of the garden. There was a scent of hay and roses in the air. Bill called the roll and reminded me again not to forget to bring back the water-bottles and have a look at the sewing-machine. I promised to do so, and we went forward up the road, following a working party of pioneers who were going up to the trenches for the night. We took with us two stretchers and a pair of wheels.

Several small houses stood along the road and flowers survived in their gardens. In one of these houses a woman stood half in and half out of her door and watched us as we passed. Some clothes hung out to dry near her house. She took in washing for soldiers and often had her little kitchen quite filled with clean clothes hanging from the ceiling. Two days before, this admirable woman had been busy ironing when shells came over. They came every five minutes and fell in a direct line for her house, each one nearer than the last. When she considered they had approached too near, she placed her irons on the stove and retired to a neighbouring kitchen at some distance down the road. The last shell knocked some tiles off the roof of her house. She waited for a while and then returned to her irons, which were still keeping hot

on the stove, and continued her work. That was two days ago. Now she stood half in and half out of her door and watched us as we passed:—first the men with picks and shovels, then the men with stretchers and surgical haversacks. A silent procession.

We soon passed the houses, and as we proceeded the shell-holes increased in number, some of them forming small ponds. When we arrived at a certain corner where the road forked, we halted for a while. This place was the outpost of inhabited country.

The working party took the road to the right, we went to the left. Our road had a notice-board over it—*Unsafe for troops in daylight.* We went forward in single file, and every man kept well in to the side of the road without having to be told to do so. Every one was silent at first. When a star shell went up beyond the trees we halted, for the sniper has cat's eyes. Occasionally bullets went through the leaves of the willows over our heads with a noise of violin strings. At a bend in the road a pump stood, without a handle. We hurried past it. Pumps are often marked points for snipers, and here a man had met his death. Near-by the aspen leaves shivered coldly: then their shadows began to move and chased other shadows over the earth. A star shell was going up. We halted. I looked back to see who was nearest the pump. Whoever he was, he was crouching down very wisely in the long grass beside the road. The shadows began to run back again

to their rightful owners. Darkness—and we started again.

Even without adventures the little journey always ended very joyfully in the dug-out at Festubert. It was a comfortable place lined with old barrels, each barrel filled with earth. With the sacking let down over the door and with two candles burning, the place became a home. A mysterious land waited for us outside, but inside all was ease, conversation, preparations for sleep. The beady eyes of a rat peeped at us from behind one of the barrels; the shadows flickered on the walls.

Tim and Jack, two Irish boys, were with me, and the place as I recall it is much coloured by their conversation. They were both idle by nature, but they were without the common sensations of fear. Wherever they were, they could always be found whispering and protesting together.

"Saargeant," said Tim, "d'ye know what the Jocks say when a shell comes over?"

"I do not."

"They swallow their tay quick and say, 'There's another of yer whures of Babylon.'

"Saargeant—d'ye know what the Micks say when a shell comes over?"

"I do not."

"They all take a peep over the parapet and say, 'There's another bastard, be Jaysus.'"

"Saargeant," said Jack, "they say the Micks are on the right of us now at Givenchy. They're a fine regiment, be Jee. I only wish I'd been a bit taller and I'd been wid them. They say they all

got wild the other day wid nothin' doin' and went over to Fritz without their officers and murdered the front line of 'em and come back again, and they had to send a bloody big officer wid a gold cap all the way from London to pacify them, they were that wild."

"Saargeant," said Tim, "d'yer see that wire mattress in the corner? Ye'll be a brave man to sleep on that all night, for I can hear the lice doin' physical exercises upon it."

At this the pair became convulsed with giggles. They repeated the witticism several times, broke off to listen to the knocking of the bullets outside, then fell to giggling again.

While one of us kept watch, the others slept. I drew out my pipe, a recent one from England, and examined it carefully. Outside the knock, knocking of bullets on broken rafters continued monotonously. I admired the shape of my pipe and conceived how exquisitely it would brown in a few weeks. I filled it leisurely.

A step approached. One of our officers pulled aside the sacking and looked in. He blinked a little in the candle-light.

"All right in here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Everything's quiet to-night—you'll not have much to do. Any cases that come, send them straight to the dressing-station. And if you send a messenger, send two together, it's safer about these roads. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

I smoked my pipe and thought: "Now he is going down the road we came up, and he may get to a little dinner by eight o'clock or he may not. He is a good, straight young fellow, little more than a medical student. . . . When did he join us? Right at the beginning of things. And he's been trying to grow a moustache ever since. . . .

"Seems to think a bit, too—thinks about us. And didn't he once stick up a picture on the walls of his billet—of the Kaiser turning away from Christ on the Cross, and asked me what I thought of it. Asked my opinion as one young man to another because he wanted to know, not for something to say. I like him for that. What odd things one remembers! . . .

"Of course, if a medical *can* survive the priestcraft of his profession added to the autocratic training of the temporary commission, he is a man indeed. But what a disappointment many of them have been: once objects of our admiration. Young soldier doctors, masters of the one indispensable profession, schooled in a hard school, used to the aspect of suffering, worthy through their knowledge to exercise real authority. . . . Not the truth. . . .

"Or damned medical militarists, without imagination, with natural sympathies eliminated, patronising their patients, despising the men under them as non-combatants. . . . Again not the truth.

"But, by Jove, don't they rely on their profession—in whatever situation? . . . Yet what a profession! The one which amid the chaos of others

continues to develop, and consistently for good, alone in Europe. What a fabric, yet what a conspiracy, what capacity for inspiration, for cruelty, for service, for tryanny, it engenders! . . . And at what a height, when all is said, the level of humanity stands within it!"

After two hours I waked Tim and told him to watch while I slept, but presently I was wide awake again at the sound of a step outside.

"Is this Festubert dressing-station?" said a voice.

"Yes."

"We have a stretcher case at the top of Willow Road."

"Then we can take the wheels."

Jack and Tim came out sleepily and we followed the messenger, who talked loudly, whistled and lit a cigarette.

"It's only to show off before us R.A.M.C. men," whispered Tim, and the two began whispering and giggling together as they trundled the wheels.

We turned to the left and emerged from between hedges on to a kind of causeway that ran out towards the front. The road had once been banked up but was now bitten away on each side by shells, so that we followed only a narrow zigzag path. The flare lights of both sides went up in front of us and the chill noise of shells and night volleys surrounded us. In daytime Willow Road was not used. A communication trench ran parallel with it Even on a moonless night we seemed exposed

to hundreds of malignant eyes who watched us from behind the bleak stumps of willow trees and even climbed the sky to peer down upon us. The messenger in front continued to whistle and to glow his cigarette in an ostentatious manner. When a sniper's bullet came between us I felt irritated at his vanity, knowing that on such occasions it is seldom the fool who pays for his own folly.

On reaching the trenches the road stopped. We found the patient on a stretcher taking leave of his friends. Three of them stood around him in their great-coats, while a fourth walked up and down as if counting the moments. The patient seemed shaken and would not leave go of their hands. "I'm real sorry to be leaving you, boys. I am indeed," and he began to weep. "There, stop your greeting," said the man who was walking up and down; "ye'll be all right when ye get to Glasgow, and remember us to Sauciehall Street."

We did not move him from the stretcher he was on, but left a closed stretcher with the N.C.O. in charge, and placed the patient carefully on the pair of wheels. "I'm no for leaving you and to go among strangers," he moaned as we wheeled him away, feeling we were but instruments of his fate. "Good-night. God bless you," a voice called after him. We continued our way back, carefully threading the shell-holes and stealing glances at our patient's face by the fitful light of the flares. We brought him down to Bill at the main dressing-

station. An hour later we were back again in our dug-out in Festubert.

We slept.

Have you ever sat all day in the British Museum and contemplated those peculiar Chinese pictures that are painted on long rolls? You sit at a deep drawer and pull out one roll after another. Perhaps you are half-way through one of them. You began at the beginning, and as you proceed you unroll in front of you and roll up behind. The little picture remains the same size but continually changes as you go forward. You have begun perhaps on a rocky path and have wound with it over bridges, round mountains, through deep woods and emerged upon the shore of a lake. Plains, hills, rivers, storms of driving rain, night and its stars, little villages, armed hordes, boats and ships sailing in the sun, you have passed by in this manner. Suddenly, without any reason, the roll comes to an end. There is a little square of writing in the corner which doubtless, if it could be read, would explain a great deal. But you cannot read the mystery. You hold the roll in your hand a moment, then drop it into the deep drawer and pull out another.

Such is active service.

When I came to myself out of a gulf of sleep and went out of the dug-out into the street of Festubert, I knew that another quite different roll had begun to unfold. The ground was the same we had trod the night before, but all else had changed.

It was half-past four in the morning and an early light of considerable beauty prevailed. There was light without shadow. The presence of the sun could be felt rather than seen. There seemed no sound, smell, touch anywhere in consciousness; only sight. Thus it might seem to be newly dead.

The knocking of bullets had ceased. I stood on a little eminence and looked beyond the ruins. Everywhere the hatred of the night was over. In the trenches the infantry were thinking of rum. The machine-gun men were cleaning their guns, the snipers had returned to their lairs to sleep.

Silence, everywhere.

I crossed to the ruined church and entered. A fine old Louis XIV bell had fallen through the tower and lay on a heap of brick dust. It had a very delicate ornamental band engraved round it. Although scratched and obscured, I could perceive the grace and vitality of the design.

"How many tocsins have you rung in your time?" I thought. "Rung how many new-old ideas into the world with each tocsin, and among them one very explosive and world-shaking which has, alas, now shaken you down from your tower."

But it had not deserved the last insult offered to it by savage men. Chips had been broken from it, and some one had left a pick leaning against it for the benefit of souvenir hunters.

I spent some time in the churchyard, in a land of still desolation. The place was so silent that I was startled by my own footsteps. The graves had

been buried or broken by shells, but Nature, with hands pious or indifferent, had covered them again with rambling roses, with larkspur, convolvulus and evening primroses. One large shell-hole was a little garden in itself.

Then I remembered the water-bottles and returned to the sleepers in the dug-out. We shouldered our belongings and started out for the main dressing-station. Gaily down the same road we marched, knowing the snipers were asleep. Its aspect now was strangely different. On each side lay vast fields of self-grown grain, surging against the tall hedges, and lifting the marguerite and the scabious higher than itself. Broken farms lay isolated in the rich wilderness or half covered in the overgrowth of their own orchards. The swamps where the aspen grew and where the water-fowl flapped in the rushes, the little lanes leading to unknown places, the airy silence over all contributed to a scene that lulled and provoked the senses.

A cat ran across the road in front of us. In these regions a daring criminal might lurk secure against all but his own conscience.

We rounded the bend, we passed the pump, we passed the notice-board at the corner. The sprays of the green oats nodded to us as we went, and presently the wild harvest seemed to mingle with cultivation.

We passed an inhabited house, then another. The sun's early rays came through the forks of the trees and sent our shadows before us. A man in a

blue cap was already at work in a field behind one of the houses.

"Look at the Frenchy, be Jee," said Tim.

"He's home on leave from the front," said Jack; "he came two days ago."

"The devil! And that's the way he spends his leave."

"Breakfast, boys!" said Tim as we reached the gate of the dressing-station.

"Damn! I've forgotten to look at that sewing-machine."

But the next few hours were only an interval in a journey. The road and the harvest land claimed us all that day. The detachment were returning to camp and we continued down the road, leaving Festubert further and further behind. Rain fell at first. We plodded through the mud with our water-proof sheets flung over shoulders and pack. Once I looked up, and we were passing through Bethune. The rain dripped heavily from the avenue trees down on to the sandbags that protected basement windows. When I looked up again Bethune was behind us, the road was dry and white again and wound uphill past a tower. My faculties returned. The harvest again surrounded us. It was wet and shining, unfolding gradually before us and growing wider and vaster. We came abreast of the tower and passed it. Our road led us on through a sea of corn to a distant prospect of trees, standing far off like a green shore. At great intervals we saw a group of women wear-

ing handkerchiefs on their heads. They swayed their bodies with the movement of the sickle or bent over the sheaves.

On our left a reaper drove his machine slowly down the flank of a long crop and we had lost sight of his head before he came to the turn. Here the corn stood over us, and looking into it we could see the submerged blue of cornflowers. The harvest was so great and the labourers so few, we said the half would be wasted. But further on the tide had ebbed and lay sheaved in neat piles as though by unseen hands. Then again the waving billows swished in our ears and from the corner of my eye I perceived a large poppy standing, arterial red, above the gold. Here was as much mystery, as much beauty, as hung over that early morning wilderness where our journey had begun.

Onward through the golden sea we went, and still onward.

Then a halt was called.

We sat in a row, luxuriously in the long soft grass at the side of the road. One man sat in the ditch opposite, chewing a piece of grass. I stood on a little bank and looked over the heads of the others.

" France, was *this* France? The name that had stood for a kingdom in the mind. Was this the form, the outward semblance, of that which had inspired so many painters, and had stood a shining plain behind the minds of her great writers?

And now she comforted us.

Strange that she should suddenly reveal herself thus. France, that *idée des idées*, now granted

a handful of Britons the most elemental of all comforts—the breath and beauty of her soil.

Turning, I spied over a low hedge a young woman with a baby seated in the centre of a large field. Around her far and wide the corn was cut. She was resting from her toil, and with strong sleeveless arms she held her baby above her head and laughed in its face. Twice or thrice she lifted it up and the child kicked and laughed in reply. There were no other harvesters in sight. These two alone in the landscape kept up their little noonday revel.

They seemed the spirits of the harvest, surprised in their benevolence, but whose labours we were not permitted to see.

Their laughter followed us down the road.

CHAPTER IV

BESIDE THE CANAL

"I love a strong and manly familiarity and conversation: a friendship that pleases itself in the sharpness and vigour of its communication: . . . it is not vigorous and generous enough if it be not quarrelsome, if it be civilised and artificial, if it treads nicely and fears the shock."[11]—MONTAIGNE.

ONE afternoon a detachment of twelve, who had been marching leisurely since noon, came to a halt on a lonely stretch of road opposite a small stable. Bill, as N.C.O. in charge of the party, still stood on his feet in the middle of the road, when the remainder of us sat down with a sigh on the bank. Bill stared at the place for a while and said—

"I suppose this is it. I don't know."

Our G.S. waggon came slowly after us along the road we had come. It was a warm afternoon in late August, the horse sweated and the wheels creaked on the gravel road. The A.S.C. driver drew up in a half-hearted way before reaching us.

"Anyway there's the canal," said Bill, sitting down beside me.

A butterfly came towards us across the stubble fields. The landscape shimmered in the heat. We sat very comfortably on the bank, hoping the problem would never be solved, and that we should sit there for ever.

Our G.S. waggon was laden with tubs and with a portable copper for heating water, also with as many canvas buckets as Bill and I had been able to collect from various quarters. We were here for the purpose of establishing and running a small brigade baths.

That morning in camp Sergeant-Major Jack himself, burnished to the last button and glinting in the sun, had stood before me with an air of command. He was making his rounds and I had run against him. "It will be your duty," he said "to provide the water supply. It will be a nice job. The Colonel will visit the place in a day or two, and you start in half an hour."

Bill got up restlessly and looked down the road. "Here's Sammy," he said. Our officer was approaching with a key in his hand. He said nothing but tried the key in the door. It fitted, and he went in followed by Bill. How annoying!—now the problem was solved and we should soon have to unload the G.S. waggon and do all sorts of fatiguing things.

As our life had for a long time past consisted in moving at frequent intervals from one spot to another, we had long since become expert at judging the personality of resting-places. Some were immediately exasperating and some immediately friendly. Some were indifferent at first and revealed their advantages by degrees. Some were treacherous, with an air of hospitality giving way to bleakness and melancholy on further acquaintance. Some, on the other hand, appeared to console,

to do their best for us at every turn. What would this be like; I wondered, gazing at the bit of a building covered by a single tiled roof, and at the little pent-house beside it.

We were not long in deciding.

The place appeared inviting. It was shaded by the tall poplar trees that grew along the banks of the canal. Even as we laboured at unloading, a cool breeze sprang up and rustled the leaves above us. The unpacking appeared to be complete in no time, the cheese and the bacon stored in a dry spot, and sleeping-room found satisfactorily for every one. The cook's fire lit at once, and, with no recollection of fatigue, we were presently all sitting with a mess-tin of hot, sweet tea between our legs.

After tea some of us went to the nearest farm and returned with news of eggs for breakfast in unlimited numbers. Others explored the neighbouring estaminets.

One by one, as the dusk advanced, the men climbed the ladder to the loft under the roof and lit a candle to write, or turned in between their blankets.

" This was a fine place," they said.

Next morning our officer was in a good temper, and after breakfast great sanitary and engineering schemes were begun. The stables were washed, scoured and whitewashed; and afterwards the tubs were set out on the clean brick floors.

The embankment of the canal rose above the level of the surrounding country. A dry ditch

ran at the foot of the embankment and the stables backed on to the ditch. This ditch was evidently designed by Providence to take the waste water from the baths.

At that time small filter beds were *le dernier cri* in sanitary circles and we determined not to be behind the times. The ditch had no fall in one direction more than in another. We therefore formed a large settling pool in the ditch by means of two mud dams twelve feet apart, and when the waste water collected in it above a certain height, sluiced it out over two roughly-formed filter beds, one at each end. By this means we conceived ourselves as maintaining the high standard of sanitation of the British Army in the field.

The next problem was the water supply. Some kind of an aqueduct was obviously required to convey water from the canal across the embankment and over the ditch to the stables.

My eye had already observed that the stables roof possessed an eaves gutter. "*Improvisation,*" I murmured. A word that covers a multitude of sins.

When at the Day of Judgment I stand before the throne and the recording angel comes to the first three years of the great war, I have no doubt I shall then find myself by a process of moral selection in the company of Peter G., Corporal Mactavish, Private Decies, Sergeant B. of the 29th and many other amateur sanitary scientists of the 9th Division. And when the celestial sergeant-major, with a pair of crossed cherubs

on his sleeve and a long list of *crimes* in his hand, asks us "what the angel" we've got to say for ourselves, we shall reply with one voice, "*Improvisation.*"

And if the magic of that word fails in heavenly circles and "escort, accused and evidence" are marched forthwith to the infernal incinerators, we shall at least have the comfort of finding the cooks have arrived there before us, and see them swimming about in the grease pits they would never take the trouble to use properly in a previous existence.

That eaves gutter was removed from the roof and was placed on wooden stays across the ditch, the lower end in close proximity to Joe and his boiler. The upper end communicated with a small trench cut across the top of the canal embankment about six inches deep. But the gravel tow-path, eight feet in width, formed a barrier. How was that to be crossed? *Improvisation* again! The iron rain-water pipe that had once communicated with the eaves gutter was made to communicate with it once more, but this time in a horizontal fashion rather than a perpendicular. The pipe was buried across the tow-path and covered with a stout board to protect it from the wheels of vehicles. One end formed a funnel mouth over the canal, the other end gave into the trench. The aqueduct was thus complete. One man with a bucket on the canal bank could now do as much work as the whole detachment running backwards and forwards.

On trial, however, the water flowed unevenly and scoured out too much earth from the trench. This was remedied by widening the trench into a small basin at the lower end and putting a grid at intervals along it.

When the Colonel arrived he inspected the work, outwardly stern and critical, but inwardly benevolent.

"To-morrow," said he, "two companies of Highlanders are coming for good warm baths. Have you plenty of soap?"

"Yes, sir," said Bill.

"May I see all this at work?" he said, indicating the water supply. This command, couched as a request, was a terrible incentive. How we prayed that all might go well. The weak part of the system was the human being with the bucket at the canal side, whose duty it was to dip and pour into the funnel as steadily and rapidly as possible. At that moment I dreamed wildly of constructing a Persian water-wheel out of jam tins, but at present the human was the only machine possible. If he became lost in thought, or if an interesting barge passed by, the water supply might fail. I selected a steady, reliable man, and he went to work with a canvas bucket. His labours were not visible from where the Colonel stood down by the stables. We waited breathlessly. Presently we heard a little swirling noise and the water dashed out of the spout on to the gutter and flowed thence over the ditch to Joe, who filled his buckets as fast as he could empty them into his boiler.

We watched for a moment or two. Proud moments long to be remembered. The Colonel remained grave, but we knew he was greatly impressed. He never failed to be impressed by the simplest mechanical contrivance, deeming it little less than miraculous.

A short amiable conversation followed, and as a mark of high approbation he granted Bill and myself each a pipeful of Magaliesberg tobacco out of the small canvas bag he always carried with him.

Colonels, bishops, judges and admirals can do such things without incurring loss of dignity.

Then he rode away gallantly on his horse.

During meal-times we paid much attention to the barges as they passed. They came up between the poplar trees and crossed our field of vision, majestically and with incredible slowness. Sometimes a large Red Cross barge painted grey would pass pulled by one steam tug in front, and pushed by another behind, while a hospital nurse off duty reclined in a canvas chair on deck.

The canal narrowed to a bottle neck at a swing bridge, which occurred every mile or so. When a Red Cross barge came to one of the bridges all the children of the neighbourhood rushed shrieking to the bridge and began swinging from it, kicking it and working handles until it lifted clear; after which they all hung over the rails and abutments in order to look on deck. Then if the hatches were open you could catch a glimpse within of a

neat row of beds with hospital charts hung over them, of bandaged heads on the pillows, of a brilliantly polished steriliser on a table.

But for ourselves, we were more attracted by the ordinary black barge following its couple of stiff horses at the end of a long tow-rope. A dark-haired, kerchiefed woman stood at the tiller as a rule, and a family of children fell up and down the companion ladder. A little boat trailed behind beside the huge rudder. We shouted to each family and asked them for their little boat *pour souvenir*, and they shouted gaily to us in return. But they seemed unwilling to grant our request. Every barge had its brasses polished to perfection, and in many of them two bay trees grew in tubs immediately in front of the companion hatch, and a small brightly-painted barrel was placed between them.

We told each other that that barrel contained rum.

"Après la guerre," said Bill, "I shall have a barge on this canal with one of them little rum-barrels and a couple of good English 'orses and treat 'em well. Yes, my boy, that's the life for me."

"And me," I said.

One fresh fine morning we stood in our breakfast place in a recess of the tow-path, having nearly completed a very excellent breakfast. The sun flashed on the water of the canal and shone dull gold on the stubble lands beyond. Bill, well lined and smoking his pipe, was more than ever

at the mercy of the better part of his nature, and I was finishing a mug of real sergeant-major tea, hot, sweet and strong, but not tasting of yesterday's stew. The wood fire still smouldered between us.

A pair of horses passed behind us along the tow-path and a long rope followed them. We knew that before long a barge would make its deliberate appearance.

"There's some cooks," said Joe, "who take all the heart out of a good bit of bacon. Now Alf had it just right this morning. . . ."

But instead of continuing this interesting topic we all turned and stared at a figure who appeared on the tow-path. He was an old hunched Frenchman carrying a whip and moving forward very slowly.

"Bong jour," we all cried in chorus, for we felt so happy that morning.

The bargee smiled and nodded.

"Damn it," said Bill, "give 'im some tea," and one of us quickly dipped a mug in the dixy and stepped forward, while Bill, hands in pockets, beamed on him equally with the sun.

He received the mug with profuse expressions of gratitude yet with the dignity of an old aristocrat. He smiled and drank. "Enchanté," I murmured. He waved the mug and drank again.

"That a drop of good tay anglay you've got there," said Bill in a loud voice as though the Frenchman was deaf. "Tay anglay—bong. Tay français no bloody bong." But Bill stopped, open-mouthed, for the Frenchman bowed to him. We

laughed. He handed back the mug, turned and acknowledged us all with a look of *complaisance*, inclined his head to Bill a second time, and passed along the tow-path.

Then the barge at the other end of the rope began to pass by.

"Seems a good old joker," said Joe.

"From what I can see of them," said Bill, "these Frenchies are a good sort—some of 'em. I was havin' a conversation with that old farmer chap who has that bit of an estaminet up by the bridge, last night."

"What about, Bill?"

"Well, he told me as how he'd 'ad three wives."

"Could he speak English?"

"No more than what I can speak French."

"What else did he tell you?"

Bill took his pipe out of his mouth and spoke gravely and shyly.

"He said he'd 'ad no children by the first two wives, but it seems he's had two by the last. He were a right good sort, Bags. You know. Like me and you. He 'ad a bad pain all day yesterday from what I could make of it, so I promised to bring him something for it this evenin'. You come along too, will you. You can speak their lingo. It's no good; I can't speak it."

I promised to accompany him, and we fell to discussing a train of artillery horses that were filing along the opposite bank of the canal on their way to be watered.

That afternoon a company of Jocks were coming

for baths. In the morning I determined to complete the shower bath, previously designed out of two oil drums. One oil drum had been perforated at the bottom by Dilke, our master metal-worker, and this I fixed rigidly in the bath-house below the ceiling joists. The other drum was arranged to pull up and down by means of a block and tackle and tip water into the perforated drum. I was arranging this carefully, and as I gazed at the ceiling I became aware of two scoffers who stood near by.

"He's always got some wee dodge," said the first.

"What's he up to now?" said the second.

"A shower bath," I said severely; "you've not heard of them in Scotland yet?"

"Naw," said the first, "explain. By Chrise, he's a learned Wully."

"A shower bath is a *frisson*," I began.

"Yer right there—it's that—we have them at hame—and if them drums come down on a naked man he'll be fricaseed right enough."

"They'll not come down," I said hotly; "and if you've nothing to do, allow me to find you something. . . . Fill this with water—take these two buckets." The two scoffers worked well, though tongues wagged and terrible results were prophesied, and by the midday meal the shower bath was complete.

The Jocks arrived in good spirits. They were in charge of a very young subaltern who walked in a lonely way up and down the tow-path while

they were at their orgies, or stood still and watched them rather enviously.

"Undress in 'ere," said Bill, entering the pent-house, followed by the N.C.O. in charge of the bathing party, followed by the party itself, and his voice emerged somewhat stifled. . . . "Undress in 'ere and proceed *with* your towels into the bath-house. There's eight tubs and two to share a tub—that's sixteen at a time. Soap provided but not clean shirts after."

When they had undressed they ran out of one door and into another shouting and waving their towels. The water supply worked well, and ran merrily over its aqueduct to the bucket-fillers, who were ceaselessly at work emptying and refilling the tubs. Joe kept his boilers hissing and bubbling and dispensed one bucket of boiling water to each tub.

Another man of our staff had a large yard-brush with which he strode up and down the brick floor of the bath-house, urging the rising tide of soapy water towards its outlet and cracking jokes with the bathers. He was the sardonic individual who had scoffed at, and laboured upon, my shower bath in the morning—a Scot himself and pleased now to be in the naked company of brither Scots. "He'll discover a relation here or I'm much mistaken," I thought.

Before half an hour had elapsed he discovered another man from Ecclefechan who turned out to be the third cousin of his mother, sitting in the end tub on the right, and the two became lost in

a loud discussion on family affairs. The cousin sat on the edge of his tub scrubbing his chest in a leisurely manner, and Macdavies stood over him with his yard-brush, both far away in Ecclefechan, while the tide of soapy water rose higher and higher over the floor.

"Get on with it, Mack," I cried to him at length.

"Here's ma cousin," he called back in an injured tone.

The sun shone in upon the bathers through the steam. Their pink bodies ran up and down splashing the white-washed walls to the ceiling. Two came clasping each other round the neck for a shower bath. I pulled the rope and a cascade of bright drops fell upon them. They shrieked and danced. Others rushed up. The shower bath was filled and emptied several times; and some of the bathers ran to the canal to have a swim. Our men continued to run back and forth with canvas buckets, while Bill smoked his pipe, shouted to every one, and busily entered numbers in a note-book.

When all was over the bathing-party fell in on the road and marched back in high good humour to their tea, with moist towels round their necks.

That evening I strolled with Bill along the tow-path under the trees in the direction of the bridge. We were on our way to visit his friend. On our left beyond the canal lay a broad expanse of country divided by hedge and fence. On our right an aged man and his wife were engaged in the difficult task of mowing a second crop of hay

in a meadow near the canal which had been wired over as a barbed wire entanglement. They had been patiently at work now for several days, standing between the strands and stakes and slowly loading the precious hay on to an old waggon resembling a Noah's Ark, which was dragged by a cow. The cow grazed peacefully for hours while the waggon was being piled.

Over this pastoral the baby swallows had been playing, strengthening their young wings for autumn flight, but now they had gathered in the air in a little cloud and gone off to their nests.

Bill had a couple of Dover's powder tablets in his pocket. "O' course, you can do the talkin' this time," he said, "but I think you'll like the old chap, he's a jolly old stick."

"I don't want to talk," I said.

A little low house stood upon the tow-path with *Estaminet* written in dingy letters over the door. The place was obviously for the refreshment and entertainment of bargees, and included a small farm, situated behind the house.

We pushed the door open and entered.

Within were a number of the most commonplace objects, a small bar in the corner, a stove, a bench, and a few grimy chairs. On the walls hung a coloured print of the Virgin and Child, and a framed advertisement of Banyul Bartissol. The windows were dirty and the place was without comfort, dark and poverty-stricken.

"Why have we come here?" I thought.

Two women sat by the stove quite quietly.

They stared stupidly at us as we entered. One held a child on her knee and wore a shawl.

A little clatter came from the corner where an older woman stood behind the bar arranging glasses. She turned and nodded to Bill.

"I suppose he ain't come in yet," said Bill to me at the door; "from what I can make out that's his wife."

She came forward from behind the bar and offered us beer.

"Beer for me," said Bill.

I asked for coffee.

"Vous aimez de caffoy," she said in a harsh voice, and reached for the coffee-mill. She ground some of the black beans and added them to the pot on the stove.

"How's Mister?" said Bill.

"Il va mieux," replied the woman.

"I've got summat for him," said Bill, nodding wisely. Then we both sat down on chairs and stretched our legs out to the stove.

We sat smoking in silence, and when the old man entered with the soil on his boots he nodded to us in a friendly way, but the silence of the room remained unbroken. I saw at once why Bill had taken to him. He was a fine old man, still upright under his years. His face was lined and furrowed and of a colour resembling his suit of corduroys. It expressed infinite patience but without the beaten look; moreover, it was familiar among human faces as the oak is familiar in a landscape, and had something reassuring about it.

He wore an old ring on his finger. As he moved slowly across the floor, the room appeared less sordid, less poverty-stricken. The two women sitting together addressed to him a few remarks. The older woman poked the stove and motioned us to draw closer round it. She handed to me the bowl of coffee and milk she had prepared.

The old man after wandering round the room drew up beside Bill's chair and began describing his illness of yesterday, occasionally looking across to me for help in an explanation. He had very blue, guileless eyes, expressing at the moment concern and sorrow over the symptoms he rehearsed for us. But Bill, smoking and looking grave, understood nearly as much of his patois as I did.

Bill said, " Seems like rheumatics or summat; I reckon it's the damp got into your bones. I got like that myself—seems like a chill on the stomach, don't it. Now when you feel it come on again you take these." Here Bill took out the Dover's powders, and at once every one was interested and began to talk. The old man handed the tablets round for inspection and thanked us gravely. Then once more silence fell.

We smoked quietly for a while.

" There's something wrong with that child," said Bill to me at length. " Piccanin malade? " he inquired sympathetically. The woman with the shawl moved and showed us the child's white, immobile face and fixed eyes. But though she looked hopefully at Bill she said nothing.

" Looks to me paralysed," said Bill.

"Is its father at the war?" I inquired, but the woman with the shawl shook her head.

"They don't know who its father is," said Bill.

The lamp was now lit and the light fell upon the little circle of us, on the aproned knees of the women, on the noble face of the old man. The sick child stared fixedly at the flame.

"Vous beaucoup piccanin?" said the older woman to Bill.

"Me kat piccanin," said Bill, holding up four fingers. "That's to say I 'ad kat, but they're dead now. . . . Bags, explain to 'em, will you?"

I hesitated. "Les enfants de Monsieur sont morts. . . ."

But Bill broke in. "I 'ad four extra *ordinary* fine 'uns. They're dead now, so I don't like to think on 'em; but they were that extra *ordinary* fine and fat. I had them took naked and they was all the same, no wrist nor ankle, only one wrinkle. But I can't abear to think on 'em."

Then the woman with the shawl spoke, and as she did so rocked the child gently in her arms. She spoke in patois and was evidently trying to explain what was the matter with the child. The woman beside her joined in and seemed to prompt her, but she did not look at us as she spoke. I could hardly follow what they said, and turned inquiringly to Bill. "It had a fall or something," said he; "one of mine began that way. Oh, it makes you feel right bad inside to see them suffering, and they can't tell you what's wrong."

"How much does it weigh?" I asked.

"Weigh!" said Bill fiercely, "I don't hold with this weighing week in week out. One week perhaps the child won't weigh what it aughter and then the parents get fretting and send for the doctor, and he says there ain't nothing wrong but they will 'ave it there is, never mind what nobody says. . . . It's a wonder some kids grow up at all."

At this the old man got up and began wandering about the room again. He spoke and gesticulated, pointing several times over his shoulder with his clay pipe. I listened and watched for the least expression on his features; his eyes were in shadow. "Puis ce vont en guerre," he repeated several times. I caught his meaning at last.

"What's he say?" said Bill.

"When they do grow up they go to the wars. He says he hasn't heard from his son since September 1914."

"My last died a few months since," said Bill. "I got leave from the Division to go and see the missus, but I didn't see the child alive."

The old man was still walking aimlessly about the room, putting his gnarled fingers into his pipe. "Puis ce vont en guerre," he repeated.

Bill became lost in thought. The old man sat down and then got up again. He quietly took away Bill's glass and filled it for him, replacing it at his elbow.

One of the women coughed.

"They say they have a child up in the front line somewhere," I said, "and that it goes over to

Fritz and comes back again. They entice it over. They say a sergeant found it in Ypres, but I don't hardly believe it."

Bill continued to stare at the stove.

"How many barges pass in a day now?" I asked the old man.

"Peut-être cinq," he replied, holding up the fingers of one hand.

"And how many avant la guerre?" I asked.

"Peut-être vingt," he replied—"vingt," and held up both hands twice.

At parting we were not allowed to pay for our drinks but were treated as guests. As we returned by the tow-path through the dark, Bill, who had raised his glass to his ancient friend, turned to me and said, "Well, I quite enjoyed that evening, Bags, didn't you? You can see he's a good old stick, can't you—a proper good old man. And he knows summat."

"Yes," I said, "but I think old people are difficult to understand."

CHAPTER V

WALPURGIS DANCE

"He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear
His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace and fear:
And you all know security
Is mortals' chiefest enemy."

Macbeth.

On the evening of September 24, 1915, a little group of R.A.M.C. orderlies left behind them the last houses of the mining village and prepared to cross the wide fields that lay beyond. At certain points they stopped, and one man of the group would bend down and stick a little notice-board into the ground. The notice-boards had a directing arrow upon them, and bore the significant words, *Walking Wounded.* They were placed at cross paths and at other points where directions were uncertain. These men were marking a route. Their strange mission drew from them no comment, provoked no forebodings: they had been well trained. But on reaching the open, so fine a prospect faced them that one and all paused in admiration.

Before them was the wide French plain in the ebb of daylight. In the west the sun had built himself an angry palace of smouldering cloud and from within seemed to strive against his setting.

In the east a perfect rainbow shone clear, striding

the world. Between these two opposites the whole earth seemed but to minister to the skies.

On our left a pyramid of slag of great size tapered upwards, yet it served only to give such scale to the scene as the human figure gives to a cathedral. The plain with its distant towers and spires vanished into mystery and insignificance. A great high-road with its avenue of feathery trees ran forward to challenge the horizon, but in its turn vanished also. The eye would not follow it beyond the first cloud bars above it. The sky claimed all. It seemed as if those familiar phenomena that mask unknown powers were about to speak. The imagery of Nature was stressed. There are moments when the supernatural has short but complete sway over all. In the west the sun was possessed of devils. Cloud-shapes and smoke added to his torture and magnificence. In the east, over the silent battle-lines, so calm a gateway shone that the rainbow and its message of peace occurred simultaneously to the eyes and minds of all of us.

Countless aeroplanes with wings twice lit passed in and out of this gateway from sunlight to starlight and back again. Indifferent grey clouds had their place in corners, and everywhere aloft forms of all conceivable emotions laughed, crouched, and wept.

The guns which had thundered for days were silent, a strange quiet hung on earth, but the sky instead was a battlefield. The secret of so much stood half-revealed that it was no wonder we remained spellbound. We knew a battle would

be fought on the morrow. We dared not guess the result. But here, perhaps, the result was already decided. The aspirations and lusts of dead generations were here. Here the crimes of nations. Here long-forgotten seeds brought to harvest, age-long ghosts striving with ghosts, old acquiescences, old follies, vanities of peoples, prophecies of statesmen and poets long dust, all whatsoever of the terrible dead that will not die, here risen and come together for judgment.

Very early next morning the walking wounded began to come down the path we had marked out for them. They came down from the dressing-stations along the interminable communication trenches to a certain sinister cross-roads situated between Cambrin and Vermelles, where their brethren on stretchers lay waiting. At this little Mecca medical orderlies were loading the hurrying ambulance cars day and night. Both shells and rain fell at intervals, and the men on stretchers moaned as they waited hour after hour: for the ambulance cars were taxed to the uttermost.

The walking wounded hurried on down the road to the mining village where women watched them passing in twos and threes. They crossed the open fields beyond and came to the Bethune road where the horse vans and lorries waited for them under the trees. Here they gathered round a coffee-van or sat in rows, officers and men side by side, made indistinguishable by those same colours of the wounded. Many had walked four or five miles

and, still the tides of strong emotions floated them above their pain. They talked in groups cheerfully; but some lay exhausted on the ground. A few had been sent down to us in staff motor-cars leaning back on soft cushions, and watched kindly by a red-capped officer who, having handed over his charges, returned to his car and dashed off on some notable errand.

Pilgrim after pilgrim came from the dread shrine over the hill, contributed each his share of hope, indignation, despair, and passed on. But first he drank a cup of tea or Oxo. Everywhere the common ordinary things of life insisted on obtruding. Last night the witches had been riding, and here were the results of their incantations—a stew-pot of tragedy and the eyes of men in pain, of exaltation, blood and weariness, of the breath of gas patients, of unspeakable oaths, of fortitude, sacrifice, and of Oxo.

The caravan where the drinks were served had its correct furniture, with little cupboards and mirrors and red wooden steps. The orderly in charge called it a little 'ome from 'ome, and he was always hard at work washing and filling enamel mugs and handing them out to the crowd. A heavy draught horse yoked to one of the ambulance waggons lowered his head to the ground. He blew out his nostrils at the smell of blood and with startled eyes regarded a thin human, a wounded Scotch infantryman, asleep on a stretcher, with a dark stain on his tartan.

The crowd of patients grew and waned and grew

again. The slow horse-waggons rolled them down the avenue of trees towards Bethune. The motor lorries bumped them down the same road, but always there were more arriving.

Who are these cutting hideous capers? They are in charge of orderlies who cling to them. "More gas patients," said a man beside me. Resentful of earth and heaven these unfortunates sit, stand, lie, or walk restlessly hither and thither seeking relief. But they, too, pass. That man who wept at the wreck of his own limbs will pass. All will pass away down the straight road to death or deliverance. Time alone will end all this; for this is of the essence of time by every sign and symptom. . . .

Patients whose wounds required dressing again, or whose bandages had become stiff or uncomfortable, were taken down into a small dressing-station below ground where wise authority had laid a large store of dressings and of perchloride solution. Here Sparky and Chatham were hard at work, and remained so all day, in the semi-darkness. One of our officers worked with them, sharing their toil and fatigue as much as superintending them.

Patients smelling of blood and of the soil crowded down into the den or sat round the entrance. They looked with frightened or weary or proud eyes at their wounds: they repeat their adventures again or grow indifferent through pain.

Once when I emerged from this dug-out on some errand I saw a French child, a boy of nine or ten, who had wandered up the road and who now stood

rooted to the spot, staring. He could do nothing but murmur to himself, "*Les blessés.*"

"Go away, child. Your eyes are more terrible than all the wars in creation. You take us seriously! You have not yet learned that Time and the Witches are pulling strings and we but dancing to a measure. No, that man on a stretcher is not dead, not even seriously wounded. . . . Go away for Christ's sake."

For a long while he stood with eyes only for the nightmare before him; then mercifully a column of men marching past up the La Bassée road distracted him.

They were a battalion of Jocks.

"Reinforcements," said a man with a bandage round his head.

"They'll need reinforcements and all, up there, before much longer," said another patient who leant against a tree.

"They're goin' in by Cambrin, I expect," said the first; "and God help them!"

One of our orderlies, a Scotch boy of nineteen, was standing near by watching the fours as they passed. He was a very silent, almost inarticulate youth who spent his life in fits of sullen gloom or of explosive industry. Some one was at my elbow speaking; but before I turned I noticed that Rob, the orderly, suddenly started as though he had taken a bullet. He took a step forward, then turned and rushed away. "What's the matter with Rob?" I thought.

"Please, sir," said a humble voice beside me.

I found at my elbow a very small man with his arm in a sling.

"That bus goes first," I said, pointing to a motor lorry. "Do you want help?" He took a step towards the motor lorry and then turned to me again. He grinned and put his hand on his stomach in a deprecating way. I followed him.

"What's the matter?"

"I've got one here that no one ain't seen yet," he said, and looked up at me confidingly.

"A wound?" He nodded. "Well, let's see it. Heavens! Why all this intrigue?" He pulled up his shirt and grinned shyly. There, sure enough, were two abdominal wounds, an exit and an entrance, which he had hitherto kept to himself for some extraordinary reason.

I scolded him well while a stretcher was brought. "Got any more about you? No. What d'ye think then—they're your wounds to do what you like with! How far have you walked? Don't know! Well, now you're a stretcher case, see? . . . And don't walk any more."

I knew that probably the stomach walls had not been pierced, but it was right in such cases to provide for the worst, and when he had been dressed anew he was sent off proudly on a stretcher with a red label tied to his button.

"Any more for Blighty?" said the waggon orderly, jumping up behind his waggon. "Bethune and Blighty—this way——" and the old horse ambulance rolled slowly off with its load of bandaged passengers leaning wearily one against another.

I was about to cross to the cook-house when the orderly Rob rushed by me, in full marching order. I noticed that his eyes were red with weeping. He jumped the footpath with a fine athletic movement and set off up the La Bassée road at a steady double.

I knew Rob to be a good cross-country runner, for he had out-distanced me on several occasions in early days, but never before had I seen him start so bravely, and with a full kit on his back.

"Where the hell is he off to?" I said aloud.

"Haven't ye heard?" said Corporal Paddy, who had been handing cigarettes round to the groups of patients. "Haven't ye heard about Rob? He saw his father a bit since going up into action. Ye know that battalion that passed up just now? Well, he saw his own dad in one of the fours—and never knew he was out in France at all. He's got leave from the captain to follow him, and to report at Cambrin after."

"Will he catch him?" I asked. And we both watched the figure lessening on the straight road.

"He's a fine runner," said Paddy.

"Christ! if he stays here he may see him before long," said a voice behind us. But we did not turn round. Paddy and I stood close together and watched the little figure eagerly.

Then he was a mere speck between the avenue trees.

Then he was gone.

Meanwhile, a cheerful noise of conversation came from a little group of wounded sitting near

together, discussing and comparing. They have for the moment forgotten their wounds and each had already made a little legend of himself. Oh, vanity! Gift of the gods! Wherewith a man will reward himself more happily than at the hands of princes! Away with your V.C.s, your M.M.s; here are the true rewards without selfishness: the little picture each mind has made, compounded of truth and imagination, of itself, its courage and its achievement.

But it is just this power of self-compensation by the human mind that makes a true tale of war impossible. No recording instrument is more inaccurate. Here are the units of armies, the instruments of nations. Far away in the capitals of Europe are those other units of Press and Government, the agents of nations. These two are divided not by space alone, but by changing seas of consciousness. Here are men returning to contribute to public opinion at home, but even as they go they are themselves changing, returning through various emotional states to the normal. Whatever their experiences, their true thoughts, have been, they are even now beyond a magic circle and cannot be truly communicated. Though but a few miles away from the fight they themselves are no longer what they were: are not now what they will be. Hence the shroud and halo over the fields of battle. Hence the continual, inevitable ignorance of the truth of war. This divorce between agent and instrument is at the

root of all the chief evils and witches' work among men.

Often a single powerful impression has grip of a man's mind. Here is a man full of admiration for a German boy soldier, who stood alone on the parapet, deserted by his comrades, to receive the charge of a Scotch battalion. A vision rises as from the ashes of old camp fires. There he stands on the parapet waiting, full of wild antagonism and the spirit of battle. He shoots three. Our men admire, but slay him. He continues to live in their minds.

Or the man comes who has followed the fight with true military instincts. He recalls all the passionate hopes, angers, regrets of the day, and eagerly inquires the doings of other battalions. The fierce interest of the game absorbs him, but his fractured arm now makes him glad his adventures are in retrospect. But a little lower down the lines in some hospital when his arm is set, and the pain subsided, he will recall his great desire for that objective, which moved him in the day of the fight, and he will say he wished to return. In England, in suitable surroundings, he will say with less sincerity and more emphasis that his *one wish* is to return. Also there is the man convinced by disaster to his own company that the whole attack is a failure. He may express this defiantly, or more convincingly by words dropped despite himself.

Gradually a whole impression can be gathered from an accumulation of many. The workings of that other Mind against us, the Enemy, can be

felt meeting, parrying, probing. Through many small reflections the protagonists can be dimly perceived, the minds of the opposing armies. The men, as they speak in various northern dialects, reveal various passions; among them hatred, tossed up with others of its kind. Yet, here in the struggle itself, Hate is not the motive force. The inspiration is the spirit of conflict, the Spirit of Life itself.

Life?

Here is war: the thing itself. Standing here upon the fringe of the charmed circle, let us look at that thing. Are not hundreds of men at this moment showing those qualities recognised as the essence of life? The intrepidity of the mountaineer, the patience of the ploughman, the travail of the woman in childbirth, the abnegation of the hermit in his cell, the self-sacrifice of a lover for his beloved.

It is true. And upon the truth of it rests a shining edifice of romance and heroism which draws all eyes.

But although it is true, it is only a half-truth.

Are not other men at this moment suffering the pain that corrodes faith, the shame that drives to suicide, the fatigue that makes them at one with clay, the hatred that makes them animals? Men with self-inflicted wounds, malingerers, lunatics, murderers of prisoners, wounded surviving against their will, cowards waiting for the court-martial. . . .

Life! God save the mark.

Yet this is true equally with the other. And

from this rises nothing but a miasma that spreads over Europe, poisoning uncounted lives so that men must fix their eyes on the shining edifice of heroism as upon Moses' serpent lifted in the wilderness demanding their faith. So the two half-truths are inseparably linked together. The one is a lie without the other. But taken together, do they form a whole Truth—form substance of Man's unanswerable achievement? Or do they negative each other? Are they together—falsehood, unrighteousness, bankruptcy?

Then rumours come from unknown sources. In the movement of men to and fro, in the swift passing of a staff motor-car, in the arrival of an ambulance full of stretcher cases, there seemed to come a comment. *The Hohenzollern Redoubt is ours.* It does not fall to a lie. . . . *The Germans are evacuating Lille.* Is it right or wrong that France should belong to the French? . . .

Oh, God, can this be the beginning of the end? May our sacrifice be not in vain. Give us victory. How can we not believe in the justice of our cause?

By now it was growing dusk. Was this the first or second night of the battle—who can remember? The firing lights for batteries were being lit in the fields. So many little red eyes. . . .

I felt myself again drawn towards the circle of speakers who were sitting round an old brazier. They had been wounded chiefly in the arm, hand or scalp, and most of them held a cigarette or mug of tea in an uninjured hand.

A man was telling of a strange incident he had witnessed a few hours before. Between puffs of a cigarette, the story seemed to escape from his mouth and take visible shape before me.

He and a small bombing party had returned from a raid and were resting in comparative safety in a shallow trench. One of the party had brought in a wounded German as prisoner. The man took his prisoner apart, and seating him on an old firing-step, proceeded to dress his wounds carefully with his own field-dressing.

"I told him he were a fool," said the speaker. "It's a crime to use your first field-dressing on any blighter—ain't it?"

I nodded.

"And on a blinkin' Boche and all——"

Then the prisoner complained of hunger. His captor gave him a biscuit and then a drink out of his water-bottle. It seemed that the prisoner leaned back and expressed thanks, but next moment he looked a bit frightened, for a bloody look had come into the Englishman's face. "Now," said he, "what about the *Lusitania?* What about the Zeppelin raids?"

As though beside himself he repeated his questions, but his prisoner only sat with a helpless, conciliating look, not daring to move.

"Then strike me blind," said the speaker, "if he didn't half turn his head away, and dig him through with his bayonet, as though against his will. Then he started walkin' up and down past him like a loon and kept stopping opposite him——

"What I can't understand is dressing his wounds before sticking him——"

The speaker ended, and spat into the brazier. He tried to light another cigarette with one hand, but failed, so I struck a match and held it for him. He had dried blood on his face and the yellow light gave it a mummy-like appearance. When the match went out it seemed that darkness had fallen. Other voices continued their interminable stories, but those other two remained painted on the darkness, the priest and victim, facing each other in their shame and agony.

A dark hour reigned and then the moon appeared upon her back, looking over the torn edges of the clouds. With admirable impartial eye she witnessed a variety of sights as they were veiled and unveiled before her. By her light the wounded, where they had fallen, disengage themselves from the dead and begin the first night of their pilgrimage, inch by inch, back to their own lines. By her light, also, the snipers were aided in their cat-and-mouse game upon the same wounded.

Thus to have watched the night earth through the ages is doubtless to have acquired perfect wisdom, or perfect indifference! Oh, statesmen of all nations, patriots, peoples, could you but look at that cold eye and see the night battlefields mirrored there; see also your own heart mirrored!

But within the coffee-van a small oil lamp burned warmly. The orderly in charge had washed all his mugs and hung them up in rows on hooks all round him. He himself sat at a fixed table reading

a novel, and whenever he moved the van creaked and all the mugs swung to and fro. The mirrors and the brass fittings shone cheerfully, and he was keeping a kettle hot over a lamp.

When I entered there was a great creaking and jingling of crockery in the cupboards. I sat down on a low shelf.

The orderly turned round and said—

"It's no good. I've read four chapters of this tale and there ain't no murder yet. . . . Seems all about parsons——"

I looked at the book. It was *Barchester Towers*, by Trollope, and had once been in my possession.

"I found it in a locker here," he said. I took the book and opened it. "I like *beaucoup* blood . . . in a tale," he continued. Then he got up suddenly: "Say, sergeant, I know what you'd like, a good drop of cocoa, eh?"

I nodded.

As he busied himself with his mugs he continued to talk. "Now a book I like is a good Hall Caine. Eh, but they're fine tales. And they're so true to life."

"What do you mean by true to life?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "what I mean is, you'll nearly always find in his tales a young woman who's been taken advantage of. But get away! You'll not find anything of that sort there!" And he pointed the finger of scorn at Anthony Trollope.

"Yet this is true to life," I replied, and continued to turn over the pages.

Gradually the mild characters within the book began to stir. Clad in decent black they descended immaculate steps from Deanery doors and trod the pavements of Cathedral towns. Their wives, their babies, their intrigues, their preferments seemed, at least, as real to them as the fantastic business of our lives seemed to us. I sipped my cocoa and dreamed of my last incarnation millions of years ago when I was a Victorian and a clergyman, when the enemy was Newman or Canon Kingsley and the battlefields were Diocesan conferences, the common rooms of Oxford, or the pages of the *Monthly Packet*.

Outside, meanwhile, the circle of patients dwindled. By two o'clock only three figures sat round the embers in the brazier. Some one had set a hurricane lamp on the damp ground, and in the upward beams of its light a man with bent head and large limbs sat motionless, speaking. His utterance was as much to himself as to others.

". . . There was one place we got to: all our officers was gone: all our N.C.O.s too; shot down, every bloody one. We was all companies and regiments mixed up—Chrise Ormighty couldn't have told who was who. Some of us wanted to go on. Some said, 'No: to hell with it, let's stay here!' There was no one to give the order—see. The Germans never once stopped for us when we charged. They'd beggar off and then come working round us with bombs. They weren't half clever at that game. It was soon bloody murder

where we was, so we retired. Well, some stayed; some retired. There was that S—— officer there too. He'd gone mad in the barbed wire. They wanted me to shoot him. *I* didn't know what to do. Awful it was. And bleed me if there weren't a Wigan lad and a Burnley lad wounded and wouldn't quit talking football. And the mad officer calling and calling his regiment. See, we had to go back. They had their machine-guns in that there village in no time. We could see them all, in their grey uniforms, making over the hills like lice. We'd gone too far—see? But I swore I'd end those bombers. Eight of them had got into a trench on our left. I went round alone. It was nearly dark by then. Five I got; they said, 'Camerade, Camerade'—they all do, but I spiked them; all but one. A young chap *he* was. In the moonlight he only looked sixteen. Not that neither. I sent him in front of me down the trench. He wept and carried on: and then, bash me! if he didn't nearly do me in, after all. We passed a box of hand grenades half open. He made a grab for one, nearly got it, too, but I gave him one on his napper just in time. Even then I didn't stick him. Couldn't. When we got out on the road he wanted to shake hands. I took him down to Sailly, for I had this bit of a wound myself. He seemed quite grateful at the finish.

"But they're a rum set of fellows—no mistake. There's a lot of youngsters among them. They say a lot of these snipers are youngsters.

"They never wait to meet us man to man.

But they can fight behind guns—any sort of guns. They're wide—no mistake. They seem to fight with their heads. But we'll learn: *those that are left of us.*"

There are no calls and curtains here. All is anti-climax except Death or Peace. Men of the R.A.M.C. who move quietly into or out of danger without praise know this. In certain moods men in the mass reveal their souls, as in certain winds leaves blow white, showing their undersides. Soldiers then march full of foreboding to triumph, or singing to annihilation; that is as we see them, but they are already in a spirit world.

All hands now to the stretchers. Back, therefore, to the trenches and those dressing-station dug-outs that used to be musty enough!

But what can they be like now?

In a foul den smelling of antiseptics, bully beef, old clothes and dried blood, behold Sparky again with sleeves rolled up at more serious work than ever. His fringe is still in curl, his moustache still pointed, the same fag end in his mouth! But his eyes are lined with fatigue.

In this phantasmagoria we meet our friends in unforeseen places and are grateful for their familiar traits. However busy a well-trained medical orderly may be he always has time for a crack with a friend. Sparky and his officer had put up at least seventeen femurs alone and used up all available Liston splints.

His officer, who worked in a similar den along the same trench, left all lesser fractures to him. This officer entered for a moment. Externally he was well known to us. He put his head on one side and allowed his eyes to dwell upon a patient exactly as of old in the receiving-room. It was fitting he should be unchanged for any stress of circumstances. His courage and a certain whimsical attitude to the business in hand rejoiced his subordinates. He had but now stood up on the railway line in a little squall of shells and coolly directed the unloading again of a trolly full of wounded ready to start. He ordered Sparky to sleep for two hours; an order he instantly obeyed.

We were directed on to the quarries, which were reported full of wounded, and from which many stories had come down to us. It seemed to be still daytime when we started, but night overtook us in the winding alleys. After hours of shuffling round endless clay corners we emerged at length upon a shallow arena where troops were coming and going.

Danger sharpens the senses like low music. It seemed that for our benefit the monomaniac genius of Man had contrived a marvellous composition of Death and the indifferent moon upon her clouds, of little black shifting figures of men, a heap of slain, giant shadows climbing the earth as the flare lights waned, a bent tree, the distant roar of big guns, singing bullets, moving lights.

Here, truly, was the second circle of sad Hell.

The bearers moved down across the sand and

round the side of the quarry; little squads of men linked by the stretchers.

We sat on a damp heap of sandbags and waited. When our turn for patients came we moved forward again, and stopped opposite the mouth of a dug-out where an orderly was supporting a patient. A medical officer stood by directing the bearers. "Move off," he said, with an impatient swing of his arm, as soon as the patient had lain down upon the stretcher.

The rain had made the chalky soil slippery, so that the bearers often lurched against the side of the trench and leaned heavily against it, unable to recover themselves under the load. A man of our squad fainted from fatigue and we finished that journey without his assistance. As the night had fallen upon us, so now the day broke and found us still rounding clay corners, still stumbling forward, while the long grass on the parapets danced in the wind.

"*Lower stretcher,*" some one groaned, and the two bearers closed their eyes and slept for a fraction of a second as they came to rest, bowed to the ground. Then I opened my eyes and saw matted hair and a brow knit in pain, quite close to me. Who was this? Of course! Our last patient! Though the senses were numb from exhaustion the brain would notice every detail, and insisted on recalling everything—

"You have been again to the quarry. You went deep down into the earth into a tomb where a number of people lay on the ground with their

heads covered. A candle burnt on a box, and the gun-fire sounded sleepy. Then you asked in a loud voice who had been there longest, and some one sat up at once and pointed out a very old Scotchman with grey hair, and a young officer who had been given morphia. . . ."

"Is it much farther, Sergeant?" said a voice, calling up to me out of a bottomless pit. . . .

"Then the man who had sat up lay down again —you remember, and you got the patients out one by one. And the officer's lips were blue with morphia and he shivered in the cold. He had nothing over him but an old overcoat stiff with blood. Then they were sniping the entrance to the quarry and your two squads had to take their chance. And all round the sides of the quarry boots of dead men and sleeping men protruded from the holes. . . ."

"*Lower stretcher.*"

"And your patient, the officer, was too tall for the stretcher, so that his heels hung over one end and his head over the other. And he weighs thirteen stone. He says so himself apologetically . . . and his teeth are chattering. . . ."

"*Lift stretcher.*"

"Is it much farther, Sergeant?"

"Not much farther," I replied, but it was a lie.

Gay voices were heard coming towards us, and presently a curve in the trench revealed a young subaltern at the head of a working party. They flattened themselves against the trench to let us

pass. The subaltern did not perceive that our patient under the old overcoat was an officer.

"Never mind, my man," he said, as we squeezed past; "you'll soon be in England among the pretty nurses."

Our patient was gazing at the sky. "My God," he groaned, and resumed the endurance of his torture.

A little farther on we came upon a group of Royal Engineers with a dixy of tea between them. One of the group stepped forward with some tea and rum in a mess tin. With great tenderness he went down on one knee and held the dirty mess tin to the patient's mouth, who supped at it like a child and fell back on the stretcher. We leaned against the trench, staring stupidly. Then we staggered on. "It's an officer," they whispered to each other as we left them.

Onward through Hell's endless purlieus we went.

There was no end to this labour. Our patient, staring upwards, was so weary of the sky. We were so weary of the earth. The clay walls were a grave of infinite length. Why not subside within them and die?

"Is it much farther, Sergeant?"

"Not much farther." And this time it was not a lie, for there, showing in front of us, were the three poplar trees. Beneath them ran Humanity Trench, and at the foot of one was our dressing-station. . . .

When we looked up again the three trees were larger and nearer. The sun shone on our left above the parapet.

We lowered the stretcher, for the last time, we hoped, and sat in a heap at the head and foot of our patient. Three men passed us along the trench and we looked at their boots as they passed, not troubling to look up. But a voice floated down to us, the voice of an angel. It said, "The Division is being withdrawn, but the ambulance must clear its wounded first." And another voice growing fainter replied, "Some of the Jocks are already asleep behind the lines."

"*Lift stretcher.*" There is Humanity Trench. "Only another fifty feet, and for Christ's sake mind his shoulder at this right-hand turn. . . ."

Twenty-four hours later, in the city of Bethune, I found myself at the door of Agostin's bakehouse. I pushed the door open and entered. Agostin nodded to me. "Monsieur had then returned to billets—yes?" and he continued making those singular movements over his kneading-machine. He worked always stripped to the waist. His body was brown, and he wore blue linen trousers and canvas slippers. He dived skilfully into the kneading-machine and brought out an armful of dough, which he slapped down on a board and weighed on a pair of large scales. Old bowed Marie, who both drove the baker's cart and helped in the bakery, and little Berthe, were busy meanwhile powdering the long baskets with flour and putting the dough into them. The baskets had canvas linings and were very thick and strong.

Everything and every one became powdered with flour—window-ledge, floor, little Berthe's eyebrows, the ridge of the oven, Agostin's arms and shoulders, the empty dove's cage, old Marie's kerchief. Eternally the fairy snow falls and settles, and the little dog who guards the bakehouse at night, and who sleeps over the oven by day, eternally leaves his pad marks on the floor.

I stood with my back to the oven door, growing warmer and warmer, and I determined I should remain there all day. After the Walpurgis dance of the last three days there was something exquisitely soothing in watching the quiet, deft, sinuous movements of Agostin. He seemed never to repeat himself, never to hesitate, like Marie and Berthe in their conversation.

I told them something of what I had seen and heard. Was it not but yesterday, but five miles distant, that all *that* had happened? How was it, then, that even as I spoke it all seemed childish and unreal? Little Berthe ran off to her coffee. Old Marie nodded over her baskets; and Agostin, though he listened politely, continued his movements, and always moved me out of the way when he wanted to get at the oven door.

When the time came to take out the loaves that were baked, Agostin took a long rake and plunged it deep into the oven. Soon the delicious, crisp, fragrant-smelling "breads" were heaped together and loaded on to Marie's van. Then Agostin continued his motions at the kneading-machine.

What was it that so affected me in watching

him? Was it a secret, yet perfectly natural, mental compensation? He seemed to assure me of the fact that not all the wars since the beginning of time had been able to stop him and his kind from thus moving about their peaceful work of making and baking five hundred loaves in a day. Was it the doubt of this that I had seen sometimes in the fearful eyes of the wounded—a doubt that they had lost the pleasant homely things of life for ever? That bread, vegetables, lamplight, the open hearth, had somehow been forfeited, the comfortable clothing of our minds stripped from us, as we lay on our backs in pain in unspeakable places. For a moment their sorrow, undistracted by fatigue, was mine. Then, in the same loneliness of outraged sense, I turned again to watch the hairy, floury-whitened arms of Agostin supporting the world.

CHAPTER VI

A CHRISTMAS

"What a pantomime creature is Man! Not content with home he attends the play, reads romances and entertains a hundred adventurous sentiments. Yet not content with adventures when he has them, nothing pleases him more than to find some corner where he can tell firelight stories with others and imagine himself at home again."—*Old Play.*

THE quintette was rehearsing "The Comrades' Song of Hope" for the concert at Christmas. The difficulty that had chiefly stood in our way was a suitable place for rehearsals. One evening I asked Belgian Marie if we could come into her kitchen and sing English songs.

"Les chansons—mais oui."

Sparky was then up in the trenches. He might have objected otherwise to the secret of Marie's parlour, to which indeed I had myself brought him, being shared by so many persons. The parlour was small, but was warm and comfortable, and held an oil lamp. Marie's grandfather sat at the stove. He was so old that he washed no more. He did nothing, in fact, but sit all day at the stove and play with bits of coke. But Marie herself was young and had very pretty shoulders that shook when she laughed.

One day Sparky and I had brought the mess gramophone by stealth and played her some waltzes

and popular airs. Poor girl, it was an event in her life. As she listened to the stalest of tunes, her eyes sparkled and became dreamy by turns, or a tender expression would come into her face.

It was partly for her sake that I had brought the quintette to her parlour. Now she stood at the stove.

She had made and handed us our cocoa in little bowls, and with hand on hip surveyed the singers. Her head was a little on one side, graceful and proud in repose. Sometimes she looked at the faces of the young men with an unconscious inquisitive look. They knitted their brows over the difficult parts in "The Comrades' Song of Hope," such as—

> "Play the man . . . play the man. . . .
> Play the man and win the fight. . . ."[22]

Marie's kitten jumped on to the knee of one of the singers. When he turned the page the kitten suddenly put out its little black paw. Marie laughed quickly and delightedly, but the serious singer paid no heed.

> "Play the ma-an . . . play the ma-an,"[22]

he continued undisturbed. . . .

"The Comrades' Song of Hope" was followed by "Sweet and Low." Private Peep, a little man with a true ear for music and a tenor voice above the average, gave out the first few bars in a soft voice, as though unwilling to draw attention to himself. Nethersole from behind his large spectacles studied the score, which was written in sol-fa notation.

Uncle Tom, chief bass, in the absence of Corporal Bailiff who was on guard, opened a large mouth and waited for the proper moment. Scolly and Alf, assistant tenors, looked along the table to Private Peep. The first rendering of "Sweet and Low" was deemed rough and the song was repeated. Marie liked it beyond others that followed.

I noticed that Marie had put on her black velvet blouse in order to show up her golden hair. She had also pinned up on the wall in our honour an English picture, a page from the *Tatler*, representing an English countess, and her three beautiful children dressed *en Fauntleroy*. Marie was exactly the right kind of audience, attentive, impressionable, attractive herself, yet ministering to our needs. We spent a happy evening and filed out from behind the table into the cold dark road regretfully.

We had said good-bye to Marie and we saw her no more, nor her grandfather fumbling at the stove, nor her oil lamp, nor the picture of the countess on the wall.

We learned we were moving, and wondered where our next rehearsal would be held.

The sergeants' mess of our new quarters was an ample room, with casement windows, green-painted panelling and a paved floor. It formed the chief parlour of a farm-house in the village. In the next room sat the ancient farmer, Monsieur R., and his elder daughter, who spent most of her time cooking and ironing. His younger daughter Leah did no house-work. She was only sixteen and was very

inquisitive. Most of her time was spent skipping about between the two rooms. Monsieur R. sat in a wooden arm-chair in front of the stove in the evenings and liked to talk with us as we went in and out.

"Café au rhum bong for serjongs," we would say.

"Thumbs up. Victory is us," he would reply. He was over sixty years old but still healthy and active, and about his farm buildings before réveillé in the mornings. On Sundays he dressed in black and went to mass.

On a morning shortly before Christmas, after parade and a kit inspection, I received instructions to help forward arrangements for the Christmas dinner. Chatham and I were to make a survey of the village and report on a suitable spot for the Christmas dinner.

"Who are we to report to?" I asked.

"To the Dinner Committee," replied Chatham.

"Who are they?"

"Nobody knows. But let us go into the estaminets and count the glasses."

The estaminet finally selected was kept by a smart, capable lady who had glasses and beer enough to go round, and who was willing to accommodate a crowd. A record of the beer drunk would be kept faithfully on her part.

We said we would cook the dinner ourselves and convey it to the estaminet. But what about a piano?

Madame was extending hospitality to two refugee

ladies, one of whom sang exquisitely, but there was no piano.

We had heard about the refugee ladies, très aimables, would they help in the entertainment? They would be enchanté sans doute. "Bong," I said. "Could we borrow a piano?"

Madame then told us that there was but one piano in the village owned by a very proud lady who lived at the farm with the white gate opposite. What about going to see the proud lady?

"She is not sympathetic to soldiers."

Meanwhile Chatham leaned against the bar and surveyed the room with the eye of a mystic. It looked very clean and neat in the morning sunshine, with its rows of little tables, flower-pots in the windows, and with its clean floor covered with sawdust. "It's no use," he said, "it won't hold every one."

Madame reminded us that there was another room overhead where some of our own men were now billeted, and which could also be used.

We went upstairs.

The room above was a large mansard chamber feebly lit by two dormer windows covered by muslin curtains. Men's kits were ranged round the room.

We discovered a long trestle table lying along the boards of the roof. That would make three tables, a fourth could be improvised. The dinner could be brought up the narrow stairs. Eighty men could have their repast up here and squeeze into the estaminet for the concert afterwards.

Outside in the street the mud was drying up in

the winter sunshine. A general service waggon passed by with a happy A.S.C. man on the box. A feeling of Christmas time was in the air. The lady of the estaminet stood on her step and again mentioned the piano at the house of the proud lady opposite. She was evidently anxious for us to attempt the loan of it, but did not want to suggest it herself.

Every one seemed to hold the proud lady in awe.

Down the street we met Sergeant Allsop with a notebook in his hand and a very melancholy expression. We stopped him. He said, "It strikes me everything's going to be a mix-up. No one knows what's what. All the posts are held up. The A.S.C. men say they don't want their Christmas dinner along with us. There's half the men this morning with kit missing, a list of religions wanted at once and every one's out on a route march, and *I'm orderly sergeant.*"

"And we've been frantically busy," I said, "all this morning, not a minute to spare, and who knows anything about what we're doing? Nobody. No one knows who the Committee are. There's not a room in the village big enough to hold every one. No tables to be had anywhere. We can't all sit on the floor. No piano. . . . No nothing. And who's going to get the vegetables, oranges and biscuits for the menu?" asked Chatham. "If they're not bought at once there'll be none left in the shops."

"The whole thing will be a box-up. . . ."

"Bound to be."

Then Sergeant Allsop went on his way, but he called us back, and related the latest story from the cook-house. "Snice but snaughty—what? Not a word! I must be off now and get this list of diseases—religions, I mean."

After which we went our ways, considerably brightened again.

"Let's go and see Private Joseph the carpenter about tables," I suggested. "There's always great virtue in a carpenter."

Joe had taken up his quarters in a kind of shed, having canvas walls made of a waggon cover that bulged inwards in the wind. All the empty bacon boxes from stores and cook-houses belonged to him by right, and no matter where the ambulance might be stationed, Joe lived continually in a busy little world of his own, in some cellar, shed or garden house, with his precious boxes and tools around him. He had plum-brown eyes and always looked surprised when he was asked a question. As he worked he revolved monstrous jokes in his mind. He spoke in a mysterious underground voice and opened his mouth to listen. "Here they comes," he said as we entered, and he continued working with a plane he had himself made out of a block of pitch pine and a safety razor.

"Any timber to spare, Joe?" He stopped work and regarded us.

"About how much *should* you require?"

"Well, we want—er—to improvise a table." He scratched his head profoundly.

"With legs?"

"Yes."

"You're asking too much." He resumed his work.

"Joe—a table—to put beer upon—beaucoup *beaucoup* beer.

"Funny, I was just thinking of beer when you come in."

"For Christmas dinner, Joe. Listen. Three long battens. Two trestles made each of two bacon boxes one on top of another." But Joe waved his plane at the ceiling.

"He comes talking to me about tables and beer when I'm makin' book-cases for the chaplain and his new hut. He'll be in here in a minute to see how they're getting on."

"Well, lend us some wood and we'll knock up something."

"You've never returned that file I lent you."

"It's Christmas time. Return good for evil, Joe."

"Ho no. I should be doing good all day long."

Then we told him the cook-house story which we had lately heard from Sergeant Allsop. It had a softening effect on Joe. He laughed with one eye and swallowed the joke for what it was worth. He then seized himself with both hands and cut a short caper. "Well," said he, "there's some battens outside about ten foot, but you'll have to get leave from the Colonel to use them."

We turned to leave him and saw a copy of *La Vie Parisienne* lying open near the door. I stopped and turned over the pages. Immediately I heard a chuckle behind me, and Joe rushed to the wall,

where he made a mark on a piece of paper. "You're the sixth," said he. "Ho yes, they all stop a minute —just a minute; privates, officers, sergeants, they're all the same. See here. There's the parson coming in, in a minute. We'll see how long he spends at it. We'll see if he's a man. Waiting all the morning for him."

He cut another caper and returned to his bench.

At dinner that day I suggested that Mack should go and visit the proud lady with the piano and plead for it for our Christmas dinner. The refugee lady with the beautiful voice should not be left unaccompanied.

"You speak French so well, Mack."

"But you have more words at your command."

"But you have more *adresse*."

"But you are so good at getting things. Besides, I'm going to medical stores. Pass the H.P. sauce."

"Have you heard about the refugee ladies?" said Sergeant Pite.

Soon after dinner I went to the farm with the white gate.

Madame at the estaminet caught sight of me through her window, and came out on the doorstep. Other faces peeped at other windows. By this time the whole village had heard of the intended festivity and of the piano difficulty. I went up a little drive to a doorstep scrubbed and spotless. I knocked, and a small middle-aged woman opened the door at once as if I was expected. This lady was probably a relation of proud Madame O.'s. She led me into a flagged parlour where other

ladies of various sizes and ages were busy sewing or ironing. They all seemed to know why I had come and all began speaking at once.

"No, she won't let you have the piano," they said in French.

I gathered that Madame O. herself was not present. These were only her retinue; all, no doubt, connected by family ties. But it was good policy to win them over if possible, so I pleaded with them first.

"She lent it once to some English officers who kept it for three weeks," said one.

"But we will return it in two days—we will pay ten francs."

"Pourquoi les officiers anglais sont-ils si fiers," said another.

"Mais nous sommes les Tommies."

"Ah—les Tommies—Allez lui demander—Tiens, j'adore les Tommies—Sergent, êtes-vous marié? Mais les officiers anglais—pourquoi si fiers—ils vous regardent comme ça—Vous avez des enfants sans doute."

The questions swelled to a chorus requiring no answers, but feeding on themselves and growing in strength.

But meanwhile one of the younger ladies, who had sped swiftly along a stone corridor opening out of the parlour and as swiftly returned, whispered to me that Madame O. would see me herself. She told me to follow her, and sped again along the stone corridor, stopping in front of a door on the right.

"The piano's in there, too," she whispered, and left me alone. I entered. The room was a kind of bed-sitting-room. A very large elderly woman sat in an arm-chair. She was so large that she concealed the arm-chair with her person. She had handsome dark eyes and hair parted down the middle; but what took my breath away was a pair of gigantic stays, resembling the armour of Hercules, which she held up between her extended arms. She had a needle in her mouth and was evidently engaged upon mending the stays; yet in spite of the needle she began a flow of speech immediately I entered the room. I wanted to run away, but the sight hypnotised me against my will, I could only stare helplessly. When I recovered my wits she had already mentioned the unfortunate loan of the piano to the officers and was instructing me to look at three scratches upon its surface.

"Ah! The piano!". I turned to obey her instructions. It was a relief.

"Mais c'est abîmé," she said behind me.

"But we should be so careful, and we would tune it for you. It would not have far to go—only to Madame at the estaminet." I said this over my shoulder, but the fascination of terror made me look round again. She put the needle in her mouth and extended her arms again. Those stays! I trembled! Any young man would have done the same. But she continued imperturbably.

"Votre fête de Noël, n'est-ce pas? Vous aurez du bonheur—et les deux Mamselles réfugiées vous assistent sans doute. Elles chantent de bonne voix.

On dit qu'elles etaient séduites par les Allemands : mais ce sera plus intéressant. Les Anglais sont des hommes comme les autres—n'est-ce pas ? "

" Mais pas les bêtes, Madame," I said.

" Dieu ! Ils sont tous des bêtes. Attendez. Pour quinze francs le piano si vous le voulez."

" Pour deux jours alors ? "

She agreed to this, and after some further conversation I hurried out of the presence. The lesser ladies in the ante-chamber cried out, full of curiosity, to know if I had been successful.

At the gate I met Chatham, who said we were both ordered to proceed to B. with an officer in one of the ambulance cars to buy supplies for the Christmas dinner.

" But the piano," I cried. " It should be fetched this afternoon, and no one will dare——"

" Ask the orderly sergeant—the officer's waiting——"

We caught a glimpse of Sergeant Allsop's slender figure at the corner with his list of religions in his hand. He noted down our religion and promised to do what he could about the piano. " It's all a box-up," he shouted after us.

Captain T. was drumming impatiently with his heels on the floor of the car.

" As soon as we get there it'll be time to come back," he said, lighting a cigarette. " Tell the driver to go first to the Expeditionary Force Canteen." The car started and we sat back in our seats watching the hop-poles pass against the winter sky.

I felt borne along like a leaf on an impetuous river, snatched from eddy to eddy.

So much for a life of sensations.

Chatham brought out a list as long as his arm and began repeating, " Plum puddings, two dozen. Twelve packets of custard powder. Onions, ad lib. Mixed biscuits at E.F.C. Query, English beer. . . ."

The town was crowded. Poulterers', butchers', greengrocers' and cake-shops were filled with civilians and soldiers. An A.S.C. man drove an English road-sweeper down the main street, impeding the traffic. Staff cars hooted majestically, and military policemen waved their arms at street corners. Officers and N.C.O.s, emissaries from mess-rooms, rushed frantically from shop to shop in their efforts to get change of five-franc notes. Chatham groaned when he thought of the ten- and twenty-franc notes in his pocket.

When the car stopped opposite the E.F.C., Captain T. said : " Send as much as you can back in the car now. You two will have to walk back." We prepared to force our way into the crowded canteen.

The interior was decorated for Christmas with holly, with coloured calendars, texts and advertisements. The tins with their red, yellow, blue and green labels were reared to the ceiling like volumes in a library. The canteen men were driven distracted over their tills improvising small change, and pacifying officers of high rank. The officers were served from a dais at one end, where they

could survey the common herd and give their orders to any assistant who might be within earshot. But down in the arena men scuffled happily round the Christmas card counter or extricated themselves from the crowd round the coffee-table, with a mug held high in one hand and a salmon sandwich in another. Seats were provided along one side where a rest could be had between the wrestling bouts.

"What price Muvver Smif's corfee stall?" said a voice near me.

"Open him. Wot's inside the blighter?" said another, inspecting his sandwich.

"Last Christmas it was Hun sausages."

"Have a mystery," said some one, handing round a bag.

"No fraternising this Christmas—'we're here to fight and not to fraternise.'"

"I reckon we'll keep quiet if they keep quiet."

I saw Big Harry standing in the crowd like a lighthouse buffeted by waves. We saluted across the storm. He was also buying Christmas things for the detachment he was in charge of.

We loaded what we could get on to the car, and then Chatham mentioned another dozen or so of items. The afternoon was spent going from shop to shop till darkness fell.

But we made each a private purchase. Chatham bought a bottle of tangerine liqueur. I bought a quantity of marrons glacés in a paper bag.

We returned in darkness and rain along the road, laden with parcels. The rain beat us to silence,

and our boots sank in the mud. But the oil lamp in the sergeants' mess shone upon us at last. I held the paper bag still in my hand, but the marrons glacés had gone. I was speechless. Chatham laughed loud and long: "He bought four francs' worth of marrons glacés and dropped them along the muddy road—*pour beau geste*," he cried.

There is a tradition in the Army that on Christmas Day the men shall be waited on by the N.C.O.s. But Chatham waited on every one.

In time of pleasure men sometimes show themselves for what they are, as truly as in times of panic.

But the cooks had also played a noble part, and came to the tables rather exhausted. We had carried the dixies up the main street from the cookhouse to the estaminet, and the French men and women got up from their vegetable soups to watch the procession of good English joints.

"Noël, Noël," we called to them; "dîner promenard—Anglays beaucoup manger!" The estaminet parlour formed an L-shaped room, having a small kitchen opening out of one end. The kitchen gave upon a back yard, now covered with smoking dixies, saucepans and dishes. Within the parlour the tables had been set end to end and plates and glasses laid. The guests had to bring their own knives and forks.

The piano, which had been fetched and tuned, was placed in the corner near the stove. In the room above, the muslin curtains had been removed

and the windows cleaned, so that more light reached the tables. Some of the men billeted in this room preferred to remain and make up parties at their own tables; others rushed downstairs and secured seats in the bright parlour below.

"Sergeant, why didn't you give us the tip? and we'd have done some decorating for you."

"Sergeant, why don't they never have only sacred picters in France?"

"Picters! Get a good side of bacon hanged up, that's the best picter."

"There's the orderly sergeant—hope he won't cop me for a guard."

"Who are the poor devils on guard?"

"They'll get their dinner all right. They don't go on duty till six."

The orderly sergeant, merciless as fate, was looking round the already crowded room for his victims. "The A.S.C. men are coming after all," he called out to me. "I'll come and give you a hand presently." At that moment I saw, through the back window, Chatham stumbling into the yard with a huge box on his shoulder.

By this time Madame in her best apron, and the two refugee ladies, one dressed in blue plush and the other in a grey check skirt and cream blouse, began to move busily about, and to take a lively interest in everything.

Madame was bobbing behind her bar, while the lady in blue plush went in and out of a cupboard which seemed full of jugs and woollen petticoats.

"Beaucoup beer, beaucoup jugs," said an interested voice. Then Madame went herself into the cupboard, from the depths of which she called out from time to time in a piercing voice.

"Which is the lady who sings so beautifully?" I asked a man in the corner.

"That one there," says he; "there she is yonder—see—in a check skirt and her hair done funny. Eh, but she's got a champion voice—and she's a nice lass and all. Shall us ask her to sing, Sergeant?"

"Later on."

The lady in question was no longer in her first youth, but both she and her friend had very graceful figures, and wore their clothes effectively. She had a pale, expressionless face, as though she had endured a great deal of physical pain, but that was only noticeable when she was not laughing or talking. She often raised her arm in its Parisian sleeve, and put her hand to her hair.

They were both obviously town-bred girls, perhaps from Lille or one of the northern cities, and had doubtless dreamed of society more *comme il faut* than ours. We knew that they were quite alone, without discoverable relations owing to the war, and that Madame was indeed their benefactress. Towards us they showed no trace either of disdain or self-consciousness, but only friendliness and vivacity, and there was not a man present who did not regard them in the same spirit.

It was Mack, I think, who once remarked that French women appeared at first mysterious, and

revealed by degrees that they were simple, whereas English women appeared simple at first and later revealed a baffling complexity.

A scene of indescribable *density* had meanwhile developed in the little kitchen. At the back, where the dishing up of the soup was in progress, N.C.O.s holding plates squeezed out of the kitchen and hurried to the tables where the men who had not yet been served were singing patiently. Having delivered their plates, they then dashed back to the swarm in the kitchen. The core of the swarm was Adam in his shirt-sleeves, helping plate after plate with fiery energy, while another helper worked more smoothly beside him. The room overhead was not forgotten, and the steep wooden stairs resounded to heavy feet as waiters rushed perilously up and down with as many plates as they could carry. To compensate for their comparatively lonely position up above, a gramophone had been provided, which two A.S.C. men took in charge, and played incessantly. Its faded tones echoed down the stairs.

Joints with two vegetables followed, then came the plum puddings with sauce. Dirty plates gathered in shoals in the yard, and were energetically attacked by a little band of helpers. Owing to Chatham, hot water was forthcoming. He had been fetching and carrying from the cook-house all the afternoon. I emerged from a long spell of covering plum puddings with sauce and found him in the yard. He was looking through the back window, through which heads and glasses could be seen.

"Well," he said, "they're enjoying themselves, ain't they. What's going on now?"

"Captain T. is replying after drinking healths."

"Then the beer phase has begun."

A kind of interval for washing up occurred, during which a friend of mine came out into the yard, already rather drunk, and began to walk about among the dirty plates. "Mind ye," says he, "this is verra pleasant, and I'm not running it down, ye understand—Sergeant—but we dinna attach importance to Christmas in Scotland. A man will not take his drop at Christmas with the same satisfaction as he will on New Year's Eve. This is verra pleasant, verra pleasant, but I could bide a week for it, Sergeant. It's no the New Year yet."

"That perhaps explains," I said, "why the chaplain refused to hold a service this morning—even a voluntary service—when the men asked him. He told me it was not the custom in Scotland. He's a Presbyterian."

"It's no the custom. It's no the custom. And why should it be? Why go to the kirk if it's not the Sabbath? We're not all papists yet, though there are many on the way, and *through the porrch of episcopacy*——"

At this point he broke a plate and was hustled out of the yard. Within the estaminet some one began a popular tune on the piano. A lamp was lit. Then another and another. Men dropped down from the darkening room above and squeezed into the parlour between the tables. Only the two

A.S.C. men stayed upstairs playing the gramophone, with absorbed faces.

Mack and I found two chairs and sat in the doorway of the kitchen. We could see half of the crowded room in front of us, the rows of heads and the glasses along the tables.

A soloist had begun to sing. It was Private Peep, who accompanied himself and sang sweetly in his drawing-room tenor. The song was " There's a dear little country." It was an old favourite and was loudly applauded.

" Why are we so fond of sentimental songs about Ireland, I wonder? "

" They are nearly as popular as Yankee ragtimes."

A ragtime followed. We sang the chorus and tapped glasses. Then I noticed that an old Frenchman had entered. He went over to the ladies at the bar, and sat smilingly near them, smoking a clay pipe. He nodded and smiled to every one.

Reggie was now singing a comic song of the old style which gave opportunity of alluding to characters in the audience. Shouts and laughter followed each sally. Reggie was a man who never changed under any persuasion of circumstances. His home was in one of the loveliest villages in western England. He never spoke much of his home, but he never lost touch with it. He always grinned when he sang his songs, and threw over the performance an old alehouse joviality and direct humour.

One of the French ladies came forward between the tables carrying a jug. Glasses were raised. She bent her head, smiled and nodded. The light from a swinging lamp fell on her shoulders.

"They'll ask her to sing," I expect. "See—there's the sergeant-major going up to her."

An interval was filled by the pianist with a rendering of "The Long, Long Trail."

"I hate that bloody wail," said some one near by.

"There's a certain crude melancholy in it," said Mack, "and in other popular songs."

"We are poor in our pleasures."

"This is comfort, not pleasure. We are comforting ourselves."

When we had all sung "The Long, Long Trail," several heads were turned towards the French ladies to see if they were much impressed.

The next song was a pleasant surprise. The old Frenchman suddenly removed his clay pipe from his mouth and stood up, still smiling. He began to sing before we well knew what he was about, and only after the noise had been hushed could we hear him. It was evidently a comic song, for he laughed at it himself, and the ladies giggled behind the bar. Yet it was very different from any English song, with its adventurous phrases and repetitions and its ceaseless prattle of words, which appeared more important than the tune. The song had several verses very entertaining to the ear, though not to the understanding: and it came to an end as suddenly as it began. We all applauded it

loudly, and called for more drinks. The old man sat down and looked towards Madame of the estaminet, as if for her approval.

"Now, perhaps, Mamselle will sing?" But apparently the lady was shy. The next item was an honest attempt by an N.C.O. to give a speech from Shakespeare, but his voice was scarcely strong enough to command silence.

Many men listened respectfully, and a few with pleasure.

> "My liege, I did deny no prisoners,
> But I remember when the fight was done."

At first the majestical language fell on our ears only as wind in the rigging of our minds. "It's no use," I thought; "we are no longer heroical, why disturb us with old achievements impossible to repeat?" But the closing lines had a kind of appropriateness.

> "And telling me the sovereign'st thing on earth
> Was parmaceti for an inward bruise,
> And that it was great pity—so it was—
> This villainous saltpetre should be digged
> Out of the bowels of the harmless earth
> Which many a good tall fellow had destroyed
> So cowardly——"

The chinking of glasses continued, and the plates of cigarettes were becoming empty. "Parmaceti for abdominal cases," said Mack as if making a mental note. . . . "Irony and Heroism go hand in hand now. There has been no single patriotic song. . . ."

Then some one in front said, "The French lady is going to sing! the French lady!" Necks were

craned. The hubbub and the snatches of conversation died down. Suddenly a woman's voice leaped like a thin flame into the air, and every one held their breath. We could not see the singer from where we sat. She was singing like a lost soul. It was the Marseillaise.

We knew the tune well enough and used to whistle it on the march, but none of us had heard it from French voices.

Now we seemed to hear it for the first time, from this mysterious woman. I rose with others and penetrated into the room.

The other two women had joined in and the three were standing together behind the bar. The old man stood up, too, and was beating time with his clay pipe. Some new spirit had seized us all. It was nothing of comfort or pleasure, heroism or romance. We were on our feet to the real thing at last, to something dynamic and intangible behind which we dimly saw the motives of our own hard lives. We roared the chorus to syllables of our own, and when the women had finished the applause was deafening. I seemed to hear remote voices shouting through mine, " Dans le cœur je vous porte . . . Français . . . savoir faire music des révolution. . . ." We clapped and shouted continuously, and many men pressed round the bar.

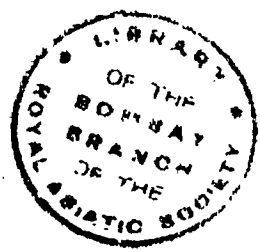
But she would not sing again, and continued, with faint colour in her cheeks, to serve at the tables.

Many songs followed, but to none was such an ovation given. The noise and moist tumult increased, and men began to sing songs on their own

account. The concert songs became increasingly difficult to hear. The quintette sang their "Comrades' Song of Hope" with spirit and were well applauded. We were glad we had not rehearsed against difficulties in vain.

The sergeant-major looked at his watch and allowed a last song. "You've all given us a fine time," said a friend, leaning against the door-post. "Sergeant," said another friend, leaning against the first, "Teddy's that wild—he shaved his nose this morning by mistake, and we tell him he'll have to go on shaving it."

"Good-night, Sergeant. We can still lie on the ground and not fall off . . . it's a great rest . . . the ground."



CHAPTER VII

IN AN ELYSIAN FIELD

"Phantoms of countless lost,
Invisible to the rest, henceforth become my companions,
Follow me ever—desert me not while I live.

Perfume therefore my chant, O love, immortal love,
Give me to bathe the memories of all dead soldiers,
Shroud them, embalm them, cover them all over with tender pride.

Perfume all—make all wholesome,
Make these ashes to nourish and blossom.
O love, solve all, fructify all with the last chemistry."

WHITMAN.

THE field with the single poplar was like an elysian field in the evening sun. The blue orchises trembled youthfully. The cuckoo-flowers shook their delicate petals in the breeze, and if you stood and looked westward across the field, each blade of grass shone a golden green and left a tiny shadow behind it.

The breeze, mild but persistent, carried to the nostrils the very breath of existence. As every colour of the spectrum combines to form daylight, so every natural odour seemed here combined to form the smell of spring, unfathomable promise, earth with still a thousand summers in her breast. The breeze had turned a windmill all day on top of the opposite hill, and as I looked towards it I seemed to catch the smell of freshly-ground flour. Other scents were discernible. The young leaves of the elms, the maturer leaves of the poplars, the

hawthorn, the larches on Mont Noir, the plum blossom, the wood smoke from cottage chimneys, the stables, the farms and the pasture lands all yielded something to be carried away by the breeze and mingled in a common breath. It was the last convincing message to the most delicate of the senses that summer had fully come, eternally richer than our dreams; and with summer a mutual labour for Nature and Man, a mutual joy.

Standing thus in the wind's eye and the sun's, all objects seemed perceived directly by the senses, and all were equally penetrated and transfused by light. But when I turned with my back to the sun to retrace my steps a change took place. The beauty was as great, but quite different. Instead of an equal glory and transparence, the million little surfaces of field and tree now reflected the light and showed each its particular shape and colour. They all shone and shivered and drew attention to themselves. "Look, I am a blade of grass;" "Look, I am a willow leaf," they now seemed to cry. But before they had been one voice, "Look at the sun through me. Look at the sun through me."

I followed my shadow back across the field in the direction of the town where we were billeted. The town also stood on a hill looking across to Mont Noir, and in its degree now made its contribution of shape and colour to the scene. A hundred dormer windows winked from the tiled roofs. Lilac bushes peeped over garden walls; the gold weather-cock burned like a star above the Flemish belfry. The eye ran over surfaces of brown brick or grey masonry,

dropped into shadows, or recognised familiar buildings between clouds and trees with satisfaction.

The little city had been built when men still took joy in the forms they created, and the harmony of these forms with the forms of Nature around them was not due to a trick of moonlight but was unanswerable in the full light of day. And this harmony was not the work of one great mind, artist's or architect's, but the work of numerous common minds who had here made plans, raised scaffolds, baked bricks, learned the angles of roofs from the weight of tiles, the heights of towers by the strength of masonry, learned to correct and to improve through the generations, learned above all to omit the ugly and increase the harmonious.

Neither was the *result* that of the inspiration of a single genius, but of the continual discrimination of lesser minds; but the result was good. What beauty, therefore, must lie in the common minds of men. I tried to turn in thought to the source of that beauty, and immediately from the past there reached the nostrils of my mind another gale of summer, compounded from all the hopes, aspirations and joys of men's minds, seeds dropped from old achievements in perennial blossom, the rich various foliage of elder generations unseen but fruitful.

From where I stood I could see one of the main streets leading up the hill between the houses. Little figures stood at their doors or went busily to and fro. Presently I reached the foot of the hill and ascended it as the sun set.

I entered the portal of a massive Louis XIV

house, used at that time for a divisional rest station, and crossed the court to the kitchens. Here one of the cooks was preparing a meal for the night-orderlies and another was sprinkling sand on the paved floor. A lamp hung from the ceiling, for the place was dark even in daytime. A sound of feet on the boards and the noise of a gramophone could be heard from the sergeants' mess above. I ran up the dark winding stairs and discovered Sparky and Big Harry playing crib and very gravely moving their match-stalks up their markers. Little Harry stood at the gramophone. He held a record in his hand under the light, and gazed at it curiously. "There was a chap in here the other day," he said, "who said he could read the music off a record by looking closely at it. He said it was a gift . . . the hell of a gift."

"Get away," said Sparky.

"But I don't know that I believe him," said Little Harry dreamily. He was listening to his favourite record, "Less than the Dust."

Steps came bounding up the stairs, and Adam entered glowing with beer and with life. He swore a Dumfries oath at the gramophone and tore off "Less than the Dust." Then shuffling the records like a pack of cards, he found his favourite and started it.

"Here's a song for ye. None of your stale English. A Scotch song, my boy."

It was "Jock of Hazeldean."

"What are the words, Adam?" He gave me a scornful glance as at an ignoramus.

"'Why weep ye by the tide, ladie? . . .' They only give three verses, and there ought to be four."

"Who's it by?"

"By Rob Tannahill."

"I think it's by Walter Scott."

"Rob Tannahill."

"Walter Scott."

"How much?"

"Tuppence."

"I'll hold the money," said Sparky.

The only reference near by was a volume of Scotch songs on a shelf, left there by the last mess. The problem was left in doubt between Walter Scott and Traditional, and the money went very pleasantly in drinks to all present.

The gramophone continued joyfully, and I forgot about the elysian field.

I slept in an attic near by, where the night-orderlies slept in the daytime. A skylight just overhead dripped when it rained. The place seemed haunted by the dusty ghosts of old travelling-trunks, and the Louis XIV door would not close properly. I tied it with a piece of string because of a certain Louis XIV rat who was wont to trot up and down the corridor at night making as much noise as a dog, and who on one occasion had put a paw under this door and rattled it.

Just before falling asleep I remembered the elysian field. Then the mixed events of past hours faded out into sleep.

I woke just before midnight, and fell to coughing. Before I was fully awake I heard some one cough-

ing in the next attic; and almost immediately became aware of an evil Something in my throat, in the room, in the corridor. A night-orderly with a flickering lamp came along, and the word *Gas* was passed from mouth to mouth.

Then it seemed that every one in every place was suddenly awake and apprehensive.

Rising, I put my head out of the skylight. It was quite dark outside. I felt the breeze, felt its gentle persistence. In a moment of real horror I realised that it was the evil thing which had awakened me from sleep.

The moment of panic passed, but the reflections that followed were worse. A gas attack was in progress. We knew what that meant; knew what it meant to hundreds at that moment. But our own discomfort was like a hideous newly-discovered clue, impossible to forget, leading us to the trenches, five miles away.

I remembered the breeze of the night before. Then it had meant Life. Now it meant Death. Compelled against my will I again put out my head into the darkness.

Powers of Satan, intangible and hideous evil, have you achieved thus far, to use for your own purposes the wind that bloweth where it listeth? The impression of Evil was now as real and as complex as that other of Good had been. The senses were struck as by a blow; yet the blow persisted and penetrated. There came upon them the conviction of corrosion and active destruction, and at the same time of something slow and subtle—

the conviction of poison. Both curiosity and dread were provoked. The smell brought recollections of hospital, workshop, laboratory. It conveyed the indoor sweat of alchemists and brewers of potions. It had come over hills and woods, it had swept the countryside, yet seemed to emerge only from the lungs of Hell.

Meanwhile a familiar sound reached our ears: the rapid thunderous noise of many guns in action. A bombardment was in process. How often had we heard the sound before. But on this night it spoke with a special voice. It was the growl of one Devil recognising another.

I withdrew my head into the room. In the coughing silence there seemed a moment when the delicate sense of smell, capable of the rarest suggestion and association, revealed a mysterious malicious Hatréd astride of the world.

The sound and the smell mingled together. Who had laboured with test-tubes, who had threaded labyrinths to achieve *this?* Who had yielded to unholy spells? Who had gone blind? Who had spent whole lives of secret labour to produce this, the voice of Death, the smell of Chaos?

Here was the achievement of the indifferent mad strifes and vanities, old failures revenged, and animosities of men, gathered out of the unswept mad-house of the human mind.

Next morning the sun shone and bacon frizzled for breakfast. The aspect of the world was un-

changed. But every one talked of the gas attack and compared symptoms. At breakfast it took its place along with other important subjects.

"If it was like that with us, what was it like up in the trenches?" said Bill.

"I can see I'm going to lose an hour's leave with this daylight bloody saving bill," said Pite sleepily.

"That was just the wind for a gas attack—about five miles per hour," said the Motor-Transport sergeant.

Orderly-sergeant Jim, feeling inquisitive, turned to the sergeant-major. "Are you expecting any orders then, Sergeant-Major?"

Sergeant-Major Jack got up and seized his immaculate belt, while Joe the servant brushed an invisible speck from his arm. He assumed an enigmatic smile. "Who says the Division's going to the Portuguese front?" Then he dashed out.

"The last rumour hasn't been cancelled yet," said Mack. He turned to me and resumed: "If in the course of your morning's work you should find yourself near my dispensary, it will be worth your while to come in and see my steriliser and other polished instruments. They are quite dull this morning. They've been oxidised by the chlorine last night. Charles is now polishing them. But you'll see the result unmistakably."

"An invitation from the Dispenser is as good as a command," I murmured, and went out.

The sun sparkled on the busy scene in the court. A water-cart drawn by mules came clattering through the gateway.

Patients in flannel pyjamas came down the steps from the house smoking cigarettes.

"After all," I thought, "last night was only another eventless incident, like so many in war, without result save a few more deaths of unknown persons, a few more among so many, forgotten two meals hence."

"Or will there be a sequel?"

The divisional rest station was a hive of industry subdivided into many parts. In the field behind the hospital the tent lines were having their morning's inspection, and Sergeant-Major Jack stopped an orderly and pointed to a cigarette-end. Cigarette-ends were crimes. The crime was removed.

"Remove a cigarette-end when you see one, and keep the British Army in the field in health; is that not so, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir," I replied.

The general duty orderly sighed and continued his work. Presently he looked up and saw the sergeant-major had gone. "Have you noticed, Sergeant," said he, "what a number of swallows have come out this morning? There's been a great increase in them these last few days."

But I pointed sternly to another cigarette-end.

My duties carried me from place to place, and every one was in high good humour. The May sunlight penetrated everywhere. In the garden outside the dispensary the lilac was in full bloom. I went up the steps leading to the glass doors of

a large room which was used as the dispensary and receiving-room. Within I found Charles, who looked at me with his usual surly friendliness.

"Look here," said he, pointing to the instruments he had been trying to polish, "as if I had nothing better to do than to polish up after gas attacks."

I gazed curiously at the direct evidence of what the sunshine bade me believe was but a nightmare.

I went out and down past the lilac bush and turned into the court. Descending some steps into a basement floor, I found Private Nethersole hard at work on what he termed his Chinese laundry. He had scores of patients' kilts beside him, and a table in front of him. He took the kilts one by one and explored the pleats carefully, having a special object in view, opening them out and then ironing them into position again. He wore a large pair of spectacles, and explored with minute care.

He nodded to me, and I went through into another basement room where Private Joseph the carpenter worked. I asked him to lend me his saw. He was very unwilling to part with it, or indeed with any instrument of his craft. But I wanted his saw, for it was the only sharp one in the Ambulance. He was very busy making hospital furniture out of bacon boxes, and he asked how he could continue his work without his tools. When I promised to bring the saw back within half an hour he allowed me to take it, and I climbed the steps again to the court.

I rejoined my squad in the field, and used the

precious instrument with my own hand. The sharp teeth bit into the wood and the sawdust flew. I forgot everything but the joy of working rapidly with a good instrument.

Then some one stood beside me, between me and the sun. I heard that I was wanted by the orderly-sergeant. I turned and went across the field towards the hospital, meeting another messenger on the way. Then the sergeant-major himself came round a corner and hailed me. I held Joe's saw in my hand.

"Sergeant, take a squad over at once to the Casualty Clearing Station. Here's a list of men. Party required at once to help with gas patients. Though why we should supply parties to every blinking medical unit in Flanders is more than I can say, but look sharp." And he hurried away leaving the list of men in my hands.

So there is to be a sequel after all.

In the court of the Casualty Clearing Station, between the lime trees, marquees had been pitched without side curtains. Beneath them their clean floor-boards made a continuous wooden platform. When we arrived and reported for duty, everything was in readiness, but the Ambulance cars had not yet arrived. A group of orderlies, laughing and chatting, waited at the main entrance. They were to unload as quickly as possible.

I went up to Sergeant Rivers, a regular and one of the ward-masters. He was standing then in his shirt-sleeves.

"The worst of it is there's so little to do for them," he said. By *them* he meant gas patients.

"What's the new treatment?" I asked. He told me, and added, "We have oxygen for them." I looked at him enviously. He had his profession at his back. He had seen death and disease in many lands, and could nurse a ward of typhoid unaided. Beside him I was a mere amateur.

But Sergeant Rivers, unlike many regulars, had preserved a certain kindliness and openness of mind, which accompanied his strenuous qualities. I felt glad that he was on duty with us.

"Here they come," he said. I turned and saw a motor ambulance come down the slope under the lime trees. Another followed it and then another. They drew up in turn at the main entrance. Immediately a couple of officers came out.

An hour later the floors of the marquees had been more than half covered with men on stretchers put close together side by side. Their faces were in shade, but their boots projected in rows into the sunlight. Each pair of legs was divided from its neighbour by a little heap of patient's equipment. Over legs and equipment the shadows played from the lime branches overhead. There was a continual twittering of birds in these branches, but also there was an undertone coming continually from under the marquees: an undertone that presently became too familiar to notice. An orderly came out from one of the marquees with an empty bottle in one hand and a measuring glass in the other, and went across to the door of the dispensary for more

of the mixture he was administering. One group of marquees contained slight cases: another group contained serious cases. Now and then among the slight cases some conversation breaks out, but is drowned in the noise of coughing. An orderly threads his way among them with a basket of oranges. He passes another orderly coming out, and they exchange mournful glances; then one of them stoops and helps to bolster up a struggling patient into a sitting position.

What is it that for once has frightened the general duty orderlies out of their accustomed chatter?

Among the serious cases two hospital nurses are quietly moving about, administering a treatment. Whenever a dose or an injection was given a little label was affixed to the patient. In course of time a patient becomes covered with little labels, and thus covered, many are removed from time to time to the mortuary.

A surgeon, young in years but old in experience, strode across the court. He began to help with the serious cases. He felt the pulse of one man who had rolled off his stretcher and was staring at the sun. With a jerk of his arm the surgeon ordered him to be removed.

Another surgeon stands near the new arrivals. He is deciding whether they are slight or serious cases, and with a look of benevolent stoicism he assigns them to one group of marquees or the other, to Purgatory or Hades.

The unloading squad worked busily. They raised the flaps of each ambulance in turn and with-

drew the stretchers carefully one by one, while the car throbbed lazily and the driver in front, with eyes heavy with dust and lack of sleep, gazed vacantly in front of him.

After awhile the cars came less frequently, and at length the sound of their wheels on the gravel ceased altogether. The work grew lighter, and then I realised the force of Sergeant Rivers' complaint that there was so little to be done for gas patients. In consequence there was less occupation to distract the mind from the vision of unnatural suffering that presented itself. The spectacle of the whole crowd thus stricken and labouring became more painful than we cared to admit to ourselves. The fresh air that passed in and out of our own lungs carelessly sustaining life and health seemed only a traitor to them. As though they had lately played with witchcraft and seen some magician face to face, Nature herself had turned from them and withheld all that she knew so well how to give. Only the dead had an enviable oblivious expression.

The shadows of the leaves continued to play over the feet of patients and over the faces of those who lay outside the marquees. The early May sunshine mocked them. The arrowy swallows mocked them, as they darted in and out of the limes, threading airy circles. Above the swallows, an aeroplane mounted high in the air, filling the sky with its hum, and presently disappeared from view. The leaves of the limes divided two worlds.

It occurred to me that perhaps some of us here,

some who had led sheltered lives before the war, might never have seen death until active service had made it familiar. Certainly some of us had led sheltered lives!

A little procession was crossing the court, two bearers with a stretcher between them and a brown form on the stretcher. They drew near to the mortuary door and entered it.

Then in the sunlight I remembered the ugly vision of the night before, as of some Evil Thing abroad in the darkness. *That* had been the reality. The Elysian Field was only a dream.

I caught sight of Sergeant Rivers later on in the afternoon, and went over to him. His work had slowed down, and he stood looking across his patients. I was surprised to find him strangely moved. I stood beside him for a moment, when he turned and spoke. He finished by saying, "This kind of thing makes me want to suffer everything for every one." Something of the kind was in my own mind, but I did not feel surprised at his words at the time. His face was no further commentary. He took a piece of lint and carefully wiped the lips of a patient who was dying. He stooped and felt his pulse. "I give him half an hour to live," he said, and turned away.

A patient, who lay at the end of one of the marquees, asked me to write a post-card to his home for him. He dictated it slowly. As I took down his words two officers passed near-by, and snatches of their conversation reached us. The patient beside me finished dictating the address

and paused in thought. The voice of one of the officers came towards us—

"You must remember that these men have disobeyed orders. They have been caught without their gas-helmets. They are repeatedly warned. It is impossible to guard them against themselves. There's no death on this occasion among the officers."

His companion flicked a small stone with his cane. They stood for a while and then returned whence they had come. The patient beside me was talking slowly, as if he had not heard, and still hesitating what he should say to his wife. I continued to look at the address, which told of a town in the Midlands.

"Of course," said he, bringing out his words painfully, "I don't want to say aught to frighten her—see. Of course I don't feel so bad—not now. But it were awful at first. And I couldn't lay hold of my gas-helmet for the moment—see. I were reading letters from home and all. It were my fault, of course. Ay—could ye give me my pack to rest my head against? That's better. Ay—it were my fault: and now I've to pay for it."

I couldn't help wondering whether the punishment fitted the crime.

"I dunno what to say. She's that tender-hearted," he repeated, and continued to fumble about on his stretcher. I was sitting beside him for a long while, and together we decided on a message that would be suitable. Then I left him and posted the card. He was one of those who

recovered sufficiently during the course of the day to be sent another stage down the line. Others like him gradually won ease and some relief from their suffering. But others declined and died.

The N.C.O. in charge of the mortuary counted his coffins.

Late the same evening I walked again in the field with the single poplar. Our squad had been relieved at the C.C.S., and I had found my way to the field almost without choice.

The same cuckoo-flowers were older by a summer day. The grasses were a day nearer hay-time. But whatever form death took for them it troubled them not. There was no sign but the same sign of joy in a rich process of life. Even as I walked I began to forget the horror of the day. Life itself seemed to mean forgetfulness. Yet it was not that those events were unreal. They were still part of me, part of my consciousness.

Compensation was the word, not forgetfulness, I thought.

Elysian fields was an idea of our ancestors for those who died in turmoil. And this was my elysian field.

My mind began to right itself like a good ship. But what of those other minds, those who had apparently gone down lost in foul seas alone? For a moment the beauty of the earth darkened in a grin of mockery. But a voice cried, "Face it. Face that fact."

My mind stretched out desperate arms seeking

an idea, a link. Why should I be here in my elysian field, quite naturally regaining health and strength; and why should not they be in theirs?

What were those words of Sergeant Rivers? What was the instinctive thought that underlay them, shared by us both at the moment they were spoken? I recollected it as this: that if we could by some natural miracle have reached them in their suffering we should have done so at all costs, at all risks. It was not only a thought: it was a desire.

But in the perfection of Thought, in God, why not attribute the same desire? What if that unison is already achieved, most truly and most powerfully?

"Phantoms of countless lost."

Perhaps they are here indeed! Perhaps we have never been separated! I tried with an effort to think away the natural forms before me, but in vain. The sun found my eyes. The breeze dwelt with its sweet persistence upon my senses, pleading for peace. It seemed that these familiar forms extended also into infinity. "Believe in us," they whispered, "and believe that God will not abuse his own Consciousness."

But it was only in heaven that I recognised the full fact of hell.

CHAPTER VIII

THREE WOMEN

"Beyond the sphere which spreads to widest space
Now soars the sigh that my heart sends above;
A new perception born of grieving Love
Guideth it upward the untrodden ways.
When it hath reached unto the end and stays,
It sees a lady round whom splendours move
In homâge; till by the great light thereof
Abashed the pilgrim spirit stands at gaze.
It sees her such, that when it tells me this
Which it hath seen, I understand it not,
It hath a speech so subtile and so fine.
And yet I know its voice within my thought
Often remembereth me of Beatrice:
So that I understand it, ladies mine."

Vita Nuova.

MARIE JOSEPH was a slim, demure girl whose head was bent like a nun's. Her shrine was her father's estaminet and I was her devotee. For the space of four days she had my active service heart.

We had come from a land of mud, back to hard roads and firm turf. We arrived late one afternoon in a little village where the old shop-windows gleamed invitingly, where the blacksmith's hammer was heard in the streets, and where a choice of several estaminets lay before us for an evening meal. On such occasions Providence guides her children. Her emissary was Mack, who met me

in the street. He had come before us on the billeting party and had been in the place two hours, so that he already possessed all essential information. He knew the quality of the beer, he knew where the brigade post-office was, he knew the schoolmistress, he could tell you where you were billeted, he could tell you how near the nearest canteen and mess was, and much else beside. He desired eggs and chips himself and took me straight to the estaminet of Marie Joseph's father. While our meal was in progress Mack was relating one of his *petits histoires philosophiques*, and then it was that I first noticed Marie Joseph crossing the parlour, her whole lithe activity subdued to a glass of beer which she carried *very carefully indeed* so as not to spill one drop.

There were several men in khaki in the room. Having delivered the glass she seemed to fade and melt between them and reappear as if by magic behind her counter.

I went up to the counter and stood with others. When I spoke French to her she scarcely raised her head, but, with her hand on the beer-tap, she raised her brows, and suddenly uncurtained her grey eyes. For a moment only I felt her inscrutable gaze and then she continued filling the glasses. But the effect was startling. It was as though she had said, " You think me a child, but really I am older even than you."

I returned to my seat with two glasses, one for Mack and one for myself. But somehow a change had occurred. It was as if the values of common

things, of eggs and chips, of beer and brown walls, of men's hats and women's aprons, had undergone a change of pitch.

Her eyes had been inquiring, contemplative, kind, but I thought they had also shown a kind of grave mockery.

Was it so or not?

For several evenings I had occasion to observe her.

She seemed to have no particle of vanity. From habit she held in her chin, and few observed the delicacy of her features. She seemed able to make herself plain or pretty at will. She moved with habitual gentleness, but her unconscious movements were swift as a cat's. On one occasion one of her small sisters who was playing between the tables fell over the legs of a tall soldier. The child gave a little squeal and her elder sister was bending over her, after a movement round the counter almost too swift to follow.

She was not more than seventeen, yet her address was perfect. In the bare parlour of the estaminet she could cross the floor, turn or stand still suddenly in the centre of the room with as much *finesse* as the most finished actress.

In the daytime she braided the hair of innumerable small sisters. She mended, cooked, washed for them. One day about eleven o'clock I came across her on her knees in front of the estaminet, scrubbing the pavement, apparently the least noticeable of little persons, dressed in a grey overall. But the evening was her time of recrea-

tion. She made no difference in her attitude to the boys who filled the estaminet and her small sisters, except that the boys amused her more. It was as if the idea of us amused her. She distinguished between us, overheard our remarks, and replied to our sallies, or not, as she wished. A question asked with the first beer might not be answered till the second, and then, having stood with a finger on the table for a fraction of a second, she would disappear suddenly. She had a dimple at the corners of her mouth. Her lips would remain demure, but the little shadow each side would deepen and her eyes would betray that she was laughing.

An old man sat by the stove as a rule, smoking his clay pipe and interjecting remarks, but Marie's aunt, when she was present, filled all lulls in the conversation with her voice. The aunt was very short and sturdy, and had a habit of carrying on her conversation uninterruptedly from every room in the house in turn.

Once she brought me my coffee instead of Marie, and I replied, " Merci, Madame."

" Non Madame—Mamselle," said the old man at the stove, correcting me. I apologised to Mamselle, but at the same time I happened to catch sight of Marie. I saw that the little shadows each side of her mouth had stolen to her lips. . . .

" Madame après la guerre," she said, and, with some needle-work in her fingers, gave me a look from her eyelids full of the gentlest but wickedest amusement.

Poor old Madame Après-la-Guerre, with a voice like wedding bells on the gramophone, could yet cook eggs and fry potatoes in oil, to a high degree of perfection. She was very stout and energetic but *très aimable*, and need not have despaired of a husband even at her mellow age. I never fathomed Marie's joke. But I never fathomed Marie herself.

She had one favourite among us—a machine-gunner. As soon as he entered she had observed him, and when he had taken his seat she was standing at his side. She carried him his beer with even greater care, and with eyes glued to the glass.

"You are ze machine-gun boy, n'est-ce pas? You go pop, pop, pop," and for once I saw her throw back her head and laugh.

He was a very ordinary red-cheeked fellow. He laughed with her and replied, "Yes, Mary—pop, pop, pop—bang—na pou!"

Many others joined in the laugh, but she had slipped from among us in an instant. We all treated her in an excellent brotherly fashion, yet quite failed to recognise her. But she could rebuke us without raising her voice.

What was this Fragonard doing among "Boers drinking"? I asked myself in vain. I would imagine her out of her plain grey dress and in that pretty one the girl wears in "The Music Lesson." In imagination I set her in the way of that sweet intoxication proper to her youth and beauty. I watched her in a ball-room, with a single bright thing in her hair, choosing exactly what partners

she wished. I watched her on a summer evening at a château window opening on to steps, with a man, her match, at her side, and a long Louis Quinze mirror in the gloom behind her.

Yet I knew my curiosity was in vain.

I could never imagine those profound eyes disturbed; their purity was invincible, their wisdom all-sufficing. Wit, challenge, and the mind of youth, the alchemy of great music, the fine intelligence of sense, was it possible she knew all these things already? Was it possible she had achieved them by some mysterious process, here in this estaminet, as a great thinker cloistered from the world may achieve experience. If not, how was she so calm, so wise? Why was humanity so obviously to her a dear familiar, incorrigible phenomenon to be served, yet laughed at, yet loved—at seventeen.

Mystery! She moved before me as completely a mystery as if I had at last seen a ghost. Alas, that she must ever remain so!

I never saw Ada of Enfield in my life. But one summer afternoon she revealed herself to us from a little grey heap of her own letters by no greater incantation than that of her own ill-formed handwriting; and to some at least among those who perceived her she remains a revelation and a friend.

Archy had been very busy one afternoon in the dressing-station, cleaning and tidying everything for which he believed himself responsible. Then he

took a broom and laboured to make the yard outside surgically clean. During these efforts he had found the letters in an old tin used as a dust-bin. What had prompted him to rescue them, how through so many vicissitudes the sheets had clung together without a fastening of any kind, and how up to that moment they had survived the zeal for cleanliness of succeeding detachments occupying the dressing-station, remained a mystery. They had undoubtedly been dropped a month previously by a patient who had come to the dressing-station and gone thence down the medical line in an unknown condition.

And the sad presumption soon followed that his condition was serious or he would not have allowed the letters to escape him.

Later that afternoon I heard shouts of laughter next door. I entered to find Archy reading something aloud which appeared to fill him with unholy glee. He began another letter as I entered. "My own darling sweetheart," he read in a high giggling voice, and then dashed behind a table to avoid the assaults of others inquisitive as himself. Chatham alone was unmoved. He was cleaning the Primus stove very carefully. He suffered from deafness and probably did not hear. Charles, who habitually wore an air of contempt, snorted and looked at Archy, but did not conceal his anxiety for him to continue. I was going through a list of equipment. One or two other men were in the room, but none of us could avoid listening to Archy's excited voice even if we had wished. Bursts of laughter followed

certain passages, and jokes and comments flowed freely.

Chatham looked up. "What is he reading?" he said to me in his slightly sepulchral voice.

"Love-letters," I said.

Just then a hush came, in which Archy read, "I treasure my dear little ring, and in wearing it always think of him the giver."

Immediately there was a roar of laughter tailing off into exclamations: "Chriky!" "My frittered Aunt!" "Strike me blindo!"

"What a shame," said Chatham, and bent again over the Primus stove. "Why don't I stop it?" I asked myself. "I'm not afraid to do so. What then? Have I lost all nice feelings?"

Archy continued. He almost collapsed in giggling, but recovered himself and stretched his arm out dramatically. He read, "I say, dear, you mustn't get crying; I can't bear to think of you like that, though I should be the same. Leave the tears to us, dearie."

But the tumult that followed was less noisy. There seemed half-heartedness and a note of shame in it. I felt a moment of rage.

"What infernal sentimental rubbish," I said aloud.

But Archy continued remorselessly. Like a true conjuror, he was not disturbed in the least by the spell that began to grasp his audience. He continued to laugh mischievously, ignoring the silence that began to settle upon us, for to those who listened it was no longer merely food for laughter.

We stood or sat round in different attitudes, but all in concentrated attention.

And gradually the mocking died away.

For what appeared before us in the littered room was nothing less than the personality of the girl herself revealed by herself with as sure a touch as that of any master of the human heart.

Her unselfishness, her vanity, her timidity in small things, her courage in great, her simplicity and her instinctive wisdom, her passionate affection and her craving for any trifle in return, the sincerity of her little confessions, her failure to be resigned in separation, her profound tenderness, were all there to be recognised by each one of us who had remained a human being.

Oh! they were nothing but the common bundle of wares with which the ordinary young woman attracts the ordinary young man. But we were ordinary young men isolated from home. Our hearts were rapidly hardening in the life we led; and now the singular familiarity and completeness of the vision before us caused something of a ferment within.

There was everything we knew in it—the fortune-teller's nonsense, the sentimental quotation, the lines from the music-hall song. There were the characters we knew, her girl friends gossiping, her father with the big tea-cup for himself, her mother in the background to whom she confided much but not all, the other men to whom she now wrote no more, and the other woman.

A situation, familiar also, had arisen between

herself and her lover, and she had dealt with it straightforwardly with instinctive cleverness, but with terrible anxiety. In the vision we had of her, our minds regained awhile the purity of hers: but with the purity the pain also. For everywhere she showed the sad half-knowledge that she was more sensitive than her lover and therefore capable of the greater suffering. We recognised in our own hearts that she had reasons for her fear. She described herself "true as steel." We knew that she was so.

It was as if she had shown herself to us by a gesture of her whole being. All the features of her mind were before us. What wonder if we almost perceived her physically. Once, indeed, it seemed that a woman in very truth had entered the room. It seemed as if she stood opposite to Archy and tried to plead against his reading.

But by then we could no more have stopped him than the thirsty can stop drinking.

When he finished there was silence. Then Charles, usually the fiercest and most misanthropic of youths, said quietly, "I wish I had a girl who'd write to me like that."

Chatham had risen. He went over to Archy, who was still chuckling to himself, and said, "Give them to me." Archy gave them up, and he put them in his pocket.

"He's goin' off alone with them. He wants them himself," jeered Archy, and ran out.

Next day Chatham and I were sitting alone

together under an apple tree watching a German aeroplane. Every one said it was a German, though it was so tiny a speck that it was only just discernible in the sky. "There's a gunner over the road," I said, "who says he can always tell a Hun aeroplane by its voluptuous flight. Does that look voluptuous?" But Chatham, instead of replying, began feeling in his pockets. "What about these letters?" he said. "They're damned odd; I hardly know what to make of them."

"I don't, either."

"Of course they're crude, sentimental, ill-written—a shop-girl's, I suppose. But I can't get away from them. Forgive me if I talk of myself."

Chatham was the mildest of egoists. He was the most truly unselfish man I had ever met. In the course of two years I had never noticed him perform a single act to benefit himself alone, and he was continually doing things for other people. He was a man of means, and education. He hobnobbed and drank with men of every standing in the ambulance, and spent his money on any one he happened to be with at the time. His manner to all was the same, considerate and courteous even to the point of deferential. But though he was truly unselfish his conversation was always about himself. Yet it was interesting, for though he was not apparently reserved, he never became stale or over-familiar, and remained for most of us something of a mystery.

Now as he spoke in the detached manner of the

deaf, he bent his head occasionally; or would rise from his seat under the apple tree, walk to and fro and sit down again abruptly.

"Of course, I'm not saying they're a human document or anything of that sort, but they're a kind of milestone that shows me how far I am from . —from home.

"I didn't hear them being read by Archy—not much of them—I'm a bit deaf; but the way all the fellows quieted down was remarkable, eh? What I mean to say, I'm not a callous sort of fellow, and I'll tell you this—taking leave of his wife is the hardest thing a man has to do in this war—don't you agree—what?

"I'm not a callous sort of fellow, and my wife and I have asked a good deal from each other. Two months ago I would have said we were ideally happy. But in this sort of life—you know—one gets covered up. As if out here we were all walking about under the same big blanket. Of course one writes and receives letters from home regularly—but there's the trouble—letters are the trouble.

"What I mean to say is, I can't write affectionately to *her* if I'm not feeling it at the moment. And one seems to feel less and less, to become a mere machine. . . . Oh, I know it's all been said a dozen times."

"It's all part of the game," I said.

Chatham did not hear, and went on as if to himself:

"And the worst of it was I was beginning not to

mind very much. When her letters came I read them sternly, cursed the war, and wrote back priggishly."

He suddenly turned to me with a queer smile.

"You see from one point of view it's really rather interesting."

"What is?"

"Why this—that in spite of all we believe to the contrary; in spite of love, faithfulness, vows and the rest—separation *can* separate. We knew it might for others, but we did not believe it for ourselves. We had been very close partners. You know the relationship, perhaps. How could we not believe in each other? But we were mistaken.

"No more intimacy now. I am free—really free. As if I had never loved. We used to talk about being independent of each other, but we never meant much by it. Well, we *are* independent now. She has her war-work at home and I have my work. The uses of our lives are unchanged. Only that we have a recollection of happiness, we might as well never have met.

"Sometimes"—he hesitated—"it's as if she were dead.

"I've been unhappy, but I can't remain so for long. . . . Yet I'm not a callous sort of fellow. . . .

"But what if she has been unhappy for a long time without my knowing it? I seem to see it now in her last letters, though I didn't yesterday. She does not like to say so. She is rather puri-

tanical. She wants to save me all she can, so she becomes more and more reserved."

"Reserve's a bloody tomb."

"It's a kind of conspiracy to save each other pain. And what comes of it? Our letters become restrained. . . . We become less and less real to each other, and that hurts *her* more than ever."

He now pulled out the grey bundle of letters which he had rescued from Archy the day before.

"I can see it now," he said, "these letters have given me a clue. Read them. Look there."

He pointed with the mouthpiece of his pipe to one of the dirty pages, and I read—

"*I like it when you call me nice sweet names.*"

At that moment a seventy-pounder in the field behind us gave out its hideous double crack and the shell shrieked over our heads into the distance. I winced.

"Can it really be true?" I said, and Chatham divined my question.

"Ah," he replied, "you, too, have strayed far. That is what I have been asking myself since yesterday."

"They like it when we——"

We looked at each other in wonder.

"I think it's true," he said; "this girl writes what my wife and yours would like to write but dare not. Read the letters again. It's sacrilege,

but still . . . That sentence is but one instance of many. Everywhere she expresses nothing less than the whole of herself. It is not art or literature—it is simply the truth. And the odd thing is she reminds me of my wife."

I read the letters through while Chatham walked up and down. There were one or two I had not heard the day before.

As I read a grasshopper made a small noise in the long grass. When I had finished I laid the letters on the grass beside me.

"She reminds me of mine, too," I said.

"I think I'll write to my wife at once," said Chatham.

"I think I'll write to mine, too," I said.

Chatham stooped and picked up the heap of letters from the grass and put them in his pocket. Then we went off in different directions.

When I write of Sœur Seline I am persuaded I should approach my subject in prayer, compose on my knees. Do not accuse me of fancies. To-day we are specially in need of a higher journalism where Truth is more obviously the end of research in impressions, and personal opinions more obviously but contributions to that end. The vast phenomena of modern life, so tempting to explore, need more than ever the spirit of scholarship and less than ever the spirit of mere adventure. He who without religion would be a scholar of men and women must forfeit one of the lamps provided for

him and leave so fair a missal as Sœur Seline unopened, unread.

As a rule personality obtrudes itself and character remains hidden. But with Sœur Seline the reverse was the case. Her personality was elusive. She was as shy as a girl of sixteen. She was by nature one of those women who look much in a man's face and reflect his expression in her own. But she had chosen long ago to look upon the face of the Master of Life and held once for all a reflection of Him.

She lived in an *asile* with other nuns of her sisterhood engaged in a life of pure service. Their services were known far and wide, for the insane of all nationalities were supported here. When the Germans entered Bailleul in 1914 they set a guard on the gates and no molestation was permitted. The sisters continued their quiet ministrations, services were held as usual night and day in the chapel, the inmates strolled under leafy trees conscious of no delusions beyond their own. The *asile* is of vast extent. Lawns and borders, avenues of trees and gardens are enclosed within its grounds. Elms and beeches have overtopped the tall mansard roofs, and in their branches thrushes, old in song, repeat their vespers with the chapel bell.

Sœur Seline was in charge of the laundry; a stately building that appeared to have a park for a drying-ground behind it. I visited her first in the company of a friend. We knocked at the big door, each of us with a homely bundle under his arm. She not only washed but ironed and

mended for soldiers, and would not take payment. I was not prepared for such a *blanchisseuse*. She stood listening to us with infinite calm attention as we spoke. A pretty dark-haired girl—a Belgian refugee—stood beside her, watchfully, hand on hip; the old women with blue aprons who worked in the laundry glanced at us over their shoulders; the machinery made a spinning noise in the air: but all was insignificant beside this one woman's face, and its revelation of quite other facts. She took us into her own workroom, where the noise of machinery could still be heard. She wished to shew us her crèche. It was a few weeks after Christmas, and she had made a big crèche in the chapel with real straw in it, but this smaller one was for the laundry "children." It was a little toy stable and manger with wooden figures and woolly lambs and a doll baby. When the "children" in the laundry were tired of their work they could hobble in here and put the woolly lambs and the shepherds into different positions, but they were shy of touching the figure of the Madonna or the doll child.

We crossed the grass to the chapel door. Sœur Seline was to show us the chapel. The sacristan, a very old sister, bent with obeisance, and carrying a bunch of huge keys, opened the door for us from the inside. The chapel was remarkable for its unusual severity and absence of decoration. The stations of the cross were small paintings on copper fixed to the wall. There were no aisles. The tall lancet windows gave a subdued light through their

stained glass. The sacred lamp burned before the simplest of altars.

I looked carefully at one of the stations of the cross. Sœur Seline, with her hands before her, looked up at it too. It was the scene in which Christ, toiling with His cross, stopped to wipe His face with the handkerchief. I asked: "Who was it who gave Him the handkerchief?" "Saint Veronica," said Sœur Seline.

Before another station, one representing the Crucifixion, I asked: "Who was the Roman soldier, ordered to thrust the spear?" "Saint Longine," said Sœur Seline. "Is it true," I asked, "that he understood afterwards what he had done?" "It is true," said Sœur Seline. "He was forgiven; he became Christian."

In one of the transepts she drew our attention to a window representing her favourite saint. But she herself looked more saintly. She considered it quite natural that religion should interest us. She answered our questions as she would those of an inquisitive child: and as she stood looking upwards under the window it was as if she was indeed our elder sister.

One thing about her puzzled me. There was something in her regard that struck me as familiar. Some quality I had seen elsewhere; but where? Finally I remembered. That look of patience I knew in some soldiers who had grown old in discipline. Yes, old Sergeant S. looked like that sometimes—he who believed he would die next time he went over the parapet.

I was not alone in yielding to Sœur Seline's influence. Others, both men and N.C.O.s, acknowledged it in different ways. To a healthy individual such mastery as hers in any region is interesting. She was of a type fairly common in Catholic countries, but unfamiliar to the average town-bred Englishman. She had that in her face that could be recognised as beauty—that is to say, as that which attracts. I have often thought how powerful, how popular a truly spiritual appeal can be. It is not always remembered how near Christ was to triumph on the day of His entry into Jerusalem. It was as an individual of supreme spiritual beauty that she attracted us. I believe it true to say that we visited the laundry chiefly to see her. But being English, we scarcely admitted it even to ourselves. I had one friend who in the region of the mind was possessed of devils. He had a genius for soiling the most sacred subjects. I remember experiencing something like a shock on discovering that he knew Sœur Seline, and had known her for some time. But he spoke a few words of simple admiration for her such as I had seldom heard from him, and then remained silent. Both his words and his unusual silence impressed me.

Sœur Seline was good and holy, and austere, unlike ourselves, but she had a simple heart like ourselves, and that was one of the reasons of her appeal. This simplicity is a characteristic of Christianity found specially in Christ Himself, but lost sight of continually because it is the habit of priests to mistake simplicity for stupidity. It is

characteristic of this simplicity to recognise at once the mastery of the Spirit when brought into contact with it—a recognition not primarily of its own weakness, but of its own ignorance. The desire for knowledge, for leadership, is implied. It is interesting that the simple imagery of the Roman Church has its effects on ill-nourished English Protestants. I know one personally, a sergeant, who was led to think much on religion by the number of crucifixes he saw, and who was confirmed while on active service that he might take communion. The desire for a true spiritual lead is here manifested; it is manifested among us over and over again. The simple heart has a peculiar discrimination of values in the matter of the Spirit arising out of its own simplicity. We had already separated in our minds army chaplains, church parades, prayers for the Allies, from that Spirit. It is manifested in that strange, shy response among men of all kinds wherever the spirit of Christ is truly shown, consciously or unconsciously.

The religious inheritance of a Catholic country, touching all departments of life, is specially visible in Flanders. Sœur Seline, herself a priestess, filled every image with the Spirit of her Faith and taught by the most powerful means.

It was the simplest of experiences to stand with her before a crude picture of Christ's labour, and learn from her the name of the woman who at such an hour was His friend. It was the simplest of experiences to see the portrait of the man who gave Christ His death-wound, to see that he was a soldier,

to learn from her that he repented afterwards, that he was forgiven and became a Christian. The simplest of experiences, but in the presence of her to whom such imagery was truth, one of the most profound.

CHAPTER IX

THE HIGHWAY

"Here knights have clattered past, here pikemen proud,
Here fainting pilgrims eastward not a few,
And shy, shade-lingering lovers, two and two,
And nuns and novices in saintly crowd.
Here Louis Bien-aimé emblazoned loud.
And here have high-famed conscripts carried through
Scarred standards to their doom at Waterloo,
And all have hoped and vanished into shroud.

And now on Time's top wave come labouring these,
With new beliefs, new hopes, new Love, new Trust:
Still tramp the long battalions through the dust,
And still from yon half-circle of old trees—
High whispering chancel that the night wind calms—
Still Christ on Calvary holds out His arms."[11]

WE were marching through the golden haze of a late afternoon in early summer. Of all the travellers before us on this highway, Louis Bien-aimé appealed to me with greater force than those others named above. Perhaps because his state was in every way the opposite of our own.

I had always understood from historical writers that he went to war in a C-spring travelling-coach of enormous size, drawn by eight horses trained to a rhythmic step; that he was accompanied by *beaucoup* beautiful ladies, in coaches of less magnificence, with their pet monkeys, cockatoos and spaniels inside, and footmen, scarlet lacqueys and

chamber-women on the box outside; that he always took with him portable theatres and opera-houses, with hosts of actors and actresses, whereby to while away the notorious tedium between victories; and that, finally, he won his war in a reasonable time, with no trouble and much glory to himself, and having done so, that he turned about, with the whole procession at his heels, and returned home as quickly as possible.

Certainly Louis's methods, his whole conception of campaigning, were different to mine or to any of my immediate friends. He had known nothing, for instance, of an iron-ration bag containing a heavy bully-beef tin that dangles from your belt and gives you a blow on the thigh with every step. Also if he had forgotten a grey flannel shirt sent to the wash at the last camp, and suddenly remembered it en route, he could order a batman with a wave of his hand to ride back and fetch it.

How differently had the fates treated him.

Yet, though I was envious, I was not jealous of him at six o'clock that summer evening. I should have been sorry, for instance, if Mack had begun to demonstrate to me that such a conception as *Louis* could never really have existed. Mack had a scientific mind. He dealt with life a trifle coldly. Ah me! This Reality of which certain steely persons are so sure! It was never more elusive than on the march, when earth passed irrationally under my feet and time was only what was past.

No, if we are but what we are, we will not grudge Louis, that God of Active Service, his being what he so superlatively was. On the contrary, such is our nature, that if Louis Bien-aimé had never existed, *il faudra l'inventer* on the march.

At that moment Little Harry, who marched next me, broke my train of thought by bumping into me. He said it was the fault of the man on the other side of him who bumped into him. Conversation began. Harry said: "It seems a bit funny marching along like this and not knowing where I'm going. I'm not used to it." "You ought to be getting used to it by now," said some one behind who had overheard; but Harry was not ruffled.

"Do you believe in a Hereafter?" he continued.

"I don't know," I replied; "I'm wondering if I believe in a Now-at-present. If you could believe in *this* you could easily believe in anything. Why the hell is Private Lee always out of step?"

"He's not out of step," said Sparky from the four in front.

"Then why does he always go up when every one else goes down, and down when every one else goes up?"

"All Jews do," said Sparky.

The column had been cheerful. Some one sang half a song, but it was not taken up. We were relapsing into the sulkiness that comes in the beginning of a march, after the first swing is over and before you have reached your second wind.

At a curve in the road we could see the baggage waggons of another column ahead of us, trailing along through the dust. One of the drivers turned and shouted something to the waggon behind him. Was it a halt? or only an A.S.C. joke? No, no halt yet. All our officers were on horseback. They looked cool and comfortable. They held their riding-whips at arms' length with the butt on their hips. "How silly of them!" I thought. "The Colonel started it and now they all do it." But the Colonel was not on horseback after all. His batman was leading his horse, and he was marching gaily ahead, swinging his cane and showing off his beer-brown gaiters. It was a pleasure to see him stepping it with ourselves. The sight roused me a moment. Reggie, our agricultural expert, was in the four in front. He never spoke much on the march, but always to the point. I asked him what was the French crop we could see above the low hedge on our right. Reggie looked at it sideways.

"Some blinkin' grass." Silence. . . .

It was no use, we were becoming submerged, chained to the heels of the man in front. I sank likewise. . . .

"Keep that blank file clear," said Big Harry from behind. It was all very well for him, he carried raisins to eat on occasions like these. "Close in to the right," he shouted again, and a large grey staff car came up on our left and passed us with a humming sound. An impression was left of a red and gold cap, an eyeglass, and a

benevolent stare. Then a veil of dust rose from the road. . . .

> " Oh for a deep and dewy spring
> With runlets cool to bathe and drink,
> And a great meadow blossoming."

" Halt and fall out on the right of the road," we heard far ahead; but still marched on. The divine words were repeated nearer at hand: " Halt and fall out on the right of the road." We stopped suddenly and there was a rush for the bank.

This was but the first halt. We were to march all night and we had been packing all the day. There was need to husband our strength. I stood wearily in the road a monemt. It was less fatiguing than to fight for a seat on the bank. But the cheerful voice of Lynwood called out: " Here's a seat, Sergeant."

Lynwood was an accomplished nursing orderly, and his conversation was one of his accomplishments. He was in a sweet, agreeable humour, and began his healing arts upon me almost before I had sunk on to a patch of scraggy grass beside him. They consisted chiefly in an invincible friendliness. Now he talked quietly and humorously and drew me with him away to his home in the north of England. He had evidently been there in thought for some time past, for he spoke with concentration. The spell of the march was upon him, too, but he seemed to know how to use it for his own purposes.

As we sat on the bank the weight of ourselves and our packs caused us to slip downwards uncomfortably, so that we had frequently to jerk ourselves a little higher, and again a little higher, in order not to slip down into the ditch below us.

". . . Yes, we used to form a party of a Saturday afternoon and go for expeditions . . . geological expeditions. We'd go perhaps to Chapel Frith, perhaps a forty-minute ride out of Manchester. An hour by a slow train. It's fine country out there. Fine hills and all. And we'd always have a right proper tea ordered beforehand wherever it might be we were going to finish up—see. Chapel Frith's got two stations—the Midland and the London North-West. Well, say we went to the Midland station; no—well, say we went to the London North-West. Eh, that's a fine expedition. Well, we'd go to Chapel-Frith-London-North-West, London Road station out of Manchester, and perhaps take us lunch, to eat in train. Then we'd walk from there over to Buxton. Or, say we'd gone to Chapel Frith Midland; well, we'd walk across into Edale, have tea there and take the train back. . . .

" My friend always arranged it all. He was a champion geologist. He'd point us out the formation as we went. Or if we came to an escarpment, he'd tell us how it come to be there. You know. He used to make it proper interesting. Of course—mind—it were a privilege for me to be with him. . . . He was a man of education. And we had ladies with us and all. And we always

ended up with a right proper tea, Sergeant—tea, bread-and-butter, eggs, jam . . . sweet cake. . . ."

"Fall in," said a voice, and the command was repeated down the road. A whistle blew.

Without comment Lynwood and I separated, and never continued that particular conversation.

When we had started again I continued to think of Lynwood and his friends for a space of several hundred yards.

Presently we turned a corner and entered a large village, where an audience waited for us. Here was a change of mood.

We raised our heads and swung our arms; and the section behind began a song with a meaning.

Now we were going to be admired. The game we were preparing to play was an old game, but worth playing. On active service who shall not excuse us for playing it?

The dust had subsided and the houses were freshly lit by the setting sun. Men and women stood at their doors; hands were waved and children ran shouting alongside of us.

All at once there was a stir at the head of the section, a cat-call, and cries of "Ah!" An officer riding in front looked behind him, and we followed his gaze. A painted young woman stood alone on a doorstep at the other side of the road. Her skirt was short, her hands were on her hips, and she held herself proudly and indolently. But her head was full of youth and well set on her shoulders. She was good to look upon. She seemed for a

moment to be confronting our animal eyes; and as she stood there, returned our stare with superb defiance.

Then deliberately she made a movement with her ankle.

It was a challenge, and we yelled in answer. But there sprang into her face on the moment such a look of passion and contempt that the licentious gesture itself seemed transformed into an act of spurning.

Here was not admiration. If it was anything, it was humiliation.

The little drama was over in a moment, but it was so startling a revelation: so obviously the act of an enemy, and of one victorious for a moment, that it appeared to me the starting-point of something to follow.

The old working women, who had seen the incident, grinned. Others, as we passed them, stood with folded arms and appeared to watch us with complacence. They seemed to rejoice in our toil.

The men, their husbands, home from the fields or the workshop, who stood smoking, hands in pockets, or who were digging quietly in their gardens,—they were our friends. But the women, *all women*, were our enemies. They seemed to say to us, as they wagged their heads and shrugged their shoulders—

"Your turn has come now, and about time, too. . . . Young men have had the world their own way for long enough. Now you have some real hard work for the first time in your lives, like as

not, and a fine fuss you make of it, with no women to look after you when the day is over. . . .

"Yes, you want us to admire you with your drums and your buttons and your proud ways. You think *that* is real grinding work. But don't your meals come regular, meat twice a day, and no one to fend for but yourselves? . . ."

The column was now in a rhythmic swing. We had left the village behind. But my pack seemed to weigh upon me with every step, and I experienced a short period of extreme fatigue. My mind danced in a lunatic maze and I thought of hideous things, but seemed always to return to the vision of a working woman's large wrinkled face, with eyes so far apart I couldn't see them.

"Yes," a voice continued in my ear, "you've had it your own way so far and a pretty mess you've made of it. . . .

"And now you've got to clear up the mess, you may learn what work really means. Your turn to sweat. You've to work for *us* now. You've to protect us and our children. . . . It's our turn to be looked after now. . . ."

"Infernal hag!" I cried. "Is this the gratitude we get for our services? To have our most sacred instincts scorned; our poor passions exposed and flung at us in the street, as that young whore did just now. Are our drums and polished buttons anything compared to your gigantic vanity? . . . . Women, monsters of materialism, you make your motherhood the ultimate excuse for standing armies, for wars and for every abomination on

earth; you give your sons and husbands to feed them, and call it *your* sacrifice. . . ."

The golden haze had now gone grey in the east and deepened to red in the west, but the air was heavy. The man in front of me was out of step. He swore he was right by the marker at the head of the column and that every one else was wrong. I touched his heel with the toe of my boot, but still he would not change. I felt myself sink again. The blind mouth hissed in my ear—

"That young woman on the step was my daughter; but who made her a whore? Fool. . . . In this war *you are our enemies.*"

"Ludicrous argument," I replied, "and used against us once too often. Are young women so pure that they deserve both a new freedom and an old chivalry? It is much to your advantage nowadays that the men are always to blame. We give you freedom and you use it to tempt us; we protect you in child-bearing and you forget us for the children; we march to defend your honour and you are false to us at home, and now in our very labour you scorn us. . . .

"I will tell you why, too. You are jealous of us!

"The tables are turned. Granted. You see the world of men, the world of young men caught in a toil that will subdue them. They will be aged, as some of you are aged, before they are thirty. But you are jealous because even now we are your masters. We are slaves in body, but unchained in mind. Our labours are not for

children to protect us, but for children with wings, for the liberties of the world. We elude you still while you are still submerged in the gross world you are so concerned to perpetuate."

I expected a parting shot in reply, but, raising my head, I became conscious of a change. The man in front of me was in step again. A cool breeze had arisen. Some one in front was singing a pleasant song to himself.

When the voice replied again it seemed no longer the voice of a temptress, but came remote on the breeze with a kind of wail—

"Then why do you cry for us when you are dying as you did when you were newly-born?"

It was not the kind of last word I had expected. I turned away from the thought, shifted my pack into an easier position, and marched jauntily like a schoolboy. "After all, why should I care? We do very well without them. We don't want them," I whispered to myself rather shamefacedly.

I tried to turn my back on them all. "Men for me," I thought.

With an indescribable thrill I remembered a piece of chocolate in my pocket. I felt for it and ate it with relish. . . . Before us now the way was dark. The road, so populous in daytime, became silent except for our feet. We were entering the night.

For a while we marched with the flare lights of the front on our left rising and falling in a wide arc as far as the eye could reach. In the gloom a

child, peeping from a cottage window, could have seen orderly lines of dark figures passing with humps on their shoulders, and each with a white bag bobbing at his back.

A warm glow of light lay on the road ahead. Each section of fours coming abreast of it looked eagerly to its source on the right of the road; and from behind we could see the light on men's faces. We looked in our turn. It was a little shrine lit by two candles. From behind a barred doorway an altar was plainly visible for a moment, with an image of a Madonna on it and a vase of flowers. For the fraction of a second it was present to us, a friendly pious light; then it was gone to mingle with all the other past things behind our backs.

Presently we came to a darkened house. On its black window-panes the reflected lights of the sky danced dismally. By now all good people were in bed. Then we came to another house. A footpath began beside us and a blind lamp-post and other urban signs appeared. Dogs barked defiantly at us from backyards.

By midnight we found ourselves in the centre of a sleeping town which dimly impressed us as being of enormous size. A large Gothic church loomed over us, towering out of sight.

"What place was this?" we asked, but no one knew.

Some one began to whistle the Marseillaise. Others took it up, and the thin inflammatory sound swayed above our tramping feet.

An attic window was thrown open and a night-

capped head appeared. Then another, and another. They waved to us and cheered sleepily.

"Les Anglais qui chantent La Marseillaise."

It was the tune that had drawn them from their beds.

We waved back and shouted to them in reply. In the market square a halt was called, but we remained standing in our fours.

A large street lamp remained alight in the centre of the market square, and beneath it we could see other battalions filing past, each man with shadows for eyes. We continued to whistle the Marseillaise, handing it on to them like a torch of sound. Their feet laid hold of it and then their mouths. Company after company passed. The night-capped heads continued to cheer, and popped in and out of windows along the sides of the square. We drew ourselves up and felt a moment of pride.

"Who are they?" some one asked from the four in front, referring to the troops passing.

"It's the brigade," a voice replied. "We follow on, I expect."

When the last file had passed by there came a rumbling sound and two cooks' carts passed under the light. Steam arose from them and a glow of coals shone behind. A man with a large fork followed.

"Ah," said a voice in our section, "them's the things, them oven-carts; they follow behind and cook a bit of breakfast all the way."

"And why 'aven't we got 'em?—that's wot I wants to know."

"They say Lord Somebody gave them to the Jocks before leaving England."

"Get in your fours there. Forward. Mind that blank file."

We followed in the direction taken by the Jocks, fulfilling the Order of March, which says that each ambulance shall follow in the rear of its brigade.

Almost immediately a great weight of sleep fell upon us. I stumbled over the cobbles and slipped against the man next me, who replied with a sleepy oath.

Looking up, we saw the stems of trees on either hand, and pendant branches overhead. We were marching through a tunnel of stars and leaves. We had left the unknown town behind.

At the end of the tunnel a halt was called; and for an hour we slept. A ditch received me into its damp softness. Near by an officer's servant lay on the ground, with his arm in the reins of a horse, who came nearer me, snuffling in the grass. The snores of the man and the munching of the horse mingled in my dreams. . . .

Very soon, in about five minutes it seemed, the sweetness of sleep in a ditch was changed to the agony of sleep on my legs. What had happened? We must have fallen in and resumed our march.

I remembered Mr. Belloc had written words somewhere to the effect that poets and soldiers had always some unpleasantness in their lives. What the poet's unpleasantness was I had forgotten, but the soldier's was having to get up and

continue his march. How true that was. But does it help matters much? Are we enduring all this in order that the Michelets and the Bellocs shall write about us? Did the charge of the Light Brigade occur merely in order that Tennyson might write his ballad and provide food for infinite cheap parodies?

No! No! Away, foul temptations. I still believe that a sweet rationality of existence reigns somewhere.

It is only Romance that has gone: that flower of youth which now resembles the dried cauliflower in my vegetable ration tin. A dried cauliflower which will be dropped presently into the soup of life, where it will swell and swell and grow ugly like Sentimentality. . . . Oh, these damned cobble stones! . . . Are you going mad? No, you are only enduring naked Time.

I remembered how once on this same march, years ago, I had walked jauntily munching a piece of chocolate and feeling glad of being free from women.

Now it seemed there were no women left in the universe. They had all been withdrawn somewhere; and I was sorry for it.

In the darkness we were a world of men, brave men, but all intent on some incredible absurdity; all blind and dumb, marching together like so many cats relying on our whiskers; and all isolated from each other by Fate. By some action in the past we had cut ourselves off from all comfort, happiness and well-being. Nothing remained

but the eternal labour, in company with others, of getting from one unknown place to another. The reason, if reason there was, lay in the moving itself. Somehow it was all really admirable. Every one agreed it was so; therefore it must be so. To move from one place to another with as much on your back as possible was the chief end of Man. . . .

"You must believe in it. You must believe. . . ."

But my mind had slipped down into my boots.

A grey dawn came and relieved us with a kind of mercy, lightening the load of sleep from our eyes.

The country had changed. To our weariness it appeared beautiful as a land of temptations. The trees were taller than we had known them before and grew together in large mysterious groups, or stood in a double ring round a cool green meadow. Cows stood knee-deep in grass under the cherry trees, or, switching their tails, lowed gently together, impatient for milking-time. Every gate gave upon a place where to sleep would be paradise. Through every gap in the hedge each meadow appeared greener, its grass softer and more inviting, than the one before.

At first the farm-houses were smokeless, but after the hour of four, farmers and labourers stood at their gates blinking at us. "Pity us, pity us, pity us," our feet seemed to say on the hard roads. "Oh, feet of civilians, pity the feet of the soldiers. We have seen you to bed and we see you arise. You have removed your boots by your stoves,

you have lain between blankets, while we have been hammering each behind the other eternally onwards."

We halted for ten minutes once every hour. The men lay down at once in the road where they stood and slept heavily.

The June morning ripened to full five o'clock glory. The sun crept down from the tops of the pollarded elms, slid down the long brown roofs of the farms and caught the buttercups in the grass. The full beauty of a rich land was revealed to us, and its beauty was intensified with longing. We crossed a wide canal bordered by tall poplars. It ran, a cool silver streak, into the dawn as far as eye could reach. What bliss to shake off equipment, clothing, body itself, to leap and possess it in spirit, to swim and to sleep. . . .

Once a halt occurred in a village. We lay down at once where we were, and slept. The milkman, with his cart and team of dogs, saw soldiers asleep in the street. He said "Bon jour," but received no reply.

The farm waggons began to roll past us on their way to market filled with produce. Beside them walked boys and women. The work of another day had begun; but stumbling forward, we knew we had no part any more in the world or its work.

Looking behind me, I saw that Big Harry was carrying some one else's pack besides his own. He had no raisins left now, but he was as imperturbable as ever. "He deserves a dozen V.C.s," I thought.

" I couldn't carry another man's pack for him, to save my life."

" We must have done more than twenty miles," said some one.

" It's all the fault of these killy-bloody-metres," said Sparky in front.

" Armies have marched thirty miles before now and gone into action at the end of it," I thought.

The battalions in front had now gone off by different routes to their billets. In front of us the road stretched unpeopled. Surely our toil was nearing an end. But Fate had arranged that our billets were much further off than those of any other unit. There was no direct road to them, but a long winding one, that ended up within sight of where we had been an hour before. The exasperation of this was intense, and gradually, as more men fell behind, the step gave out, and after a few efforts on the part of Big Harry, no one made an attempt to restore it. We knew it was useless. Big Harry was probably the only N.C.O. left in the unit with any breath in him. Sergeant Henley, the regular, who had often talked to us of South Africa and called this war a picnic by comparison, now shuffled along grey and speechless.

But then we learned by its absence what the step really meant to us. Without the rhythm of the whole as a narcotic in which all share, each individual becomes acutely conscious of his particular effort. He has nothing to help him, and can never attain forgetfulness again. Without eyes, without ears, we laboured forward, each one alone

in the crowd, each one bearing his own infirmities with what fortitude he could.

"Is it thus to be very old? . . .

"What if we had to do it all over again . . . now? . . .

"When we do halt—will they keep us marking time while we right turn and cover off?"

Half an hour later Paradise had come.

In a certain cherry orchard, a certain old hay waggon lacking a wheel had slumbered in the long grass for several summers. A very old lean pig was wont to come and rub against it at an early hour in the morning. But the pair were disturbed at six o'clock on that particular morning by a mob of grey-brown men who stumbled through the grass and fell on the ground in little groups. They leaned back against their packs, or propped themselves against the stems of the cherry trees. The grass was long and untrampled, except for the little lanes that led to where each man had fallen. The sun was hot, but a dappled shade prevailed. Those who had dropped in the sun gradually shifted until the trees shaded them. Then they slipped their arms from their packs, took off their tunics, rolled over at full length and slept.

The ancient pig made off through a gap in the hedge.

All day men slept. The cherry tree shadows, slipping imperceptibly round their stems, alone marked the hours.

At noon I rose. The soft full dream of summer was too luxurious for unconsciousness. The peacefulness of my fellows, the abundant quiet life in field and tree, the humming of bees, the voice of the cuckoo, made me restless, and in spite of the fatigues of the night I had a hundred desires. I wanted to find even softer grass. I wanted to read Keats. I wanted to think quietly of home. I wanted cooler shade. I wanted to brown myself in the sun. The vision through a gate of yet another orchard untrod by man attracted me. I wandered as though sleep-walking in broad day, and found myself eventually at the farm-house.

Here a woman was hanging up clothes on a line. First two pink garments, then a *chemise de nuit*, then an apron, then a small pair of pantaloons. . . . The woman nodded in a friendly way.

A brick-lined pool of clear water stood near by. "Here one could shave!" I watched a hen who stood on the edge of the pool and drank in a ludicrous manner.

On my way back I found another wanderer. Little Norton sat on a tree trunk, reading a letter.

"Have the letters come?"

He nodded.

"Wait here," I said; "I'll come back."

Presently we were reading our letters side by side. Mine was a cheerful one from home. But when I looked at my companion his face had the stiff look which I knew meant he was troubled.

Norton was a little man who was almost universally despised as being stupid. But he was

not stupid; he was only very slow. The time element in his thinking was different to other persons'. His eyes were always wide open and had a baffled look, as if the world was altogether too complex a place for him.

I was sitting below him on the grass, with my letter in my hand. I was looking up at him.

"Is your letter from your wife?" he asked.

"Yes." He paused and then said—

"You can't never understand a woman. I can't. Even your wife. . . . A woman or a horse . . . they may be faithful for years . . . and then . . . they'll turn and bite you."

"I wouldn't say a woman was as bad in that way as a horse."

"No," he continued sadly. "And the trouble is you can't understand them, but they *can* understand you."

I replied rather hotly that I believed I was quite as intelligent as my wife. But I was sorry in a moment I had no consolation to offer him. He sighed heavily and said—

"Of course it's no use complaining."

The look in his brown eyes was more baffled than ever.

We returned each to his lair in the orchard. "These people think and suffer, but are so inarticulate that no one knows to what conclusions they arrive," I thought. "He once told me he had been married very happily for three years and had a child. Probably his wife is ill and will not tell him that she is so; and he has heard

about her from a neighbour. It often happens like that. They cannot express themselves in letters, so they say nothing about what troubles them most, until perhaps the time comes when a doctor writes instead. . . . Or, again, they are at the mercy of any other person who writes and drops a phrase they cannot forget.

"Husband and wife . . . how is it the relationship survives such blankness at all? . . . He may have marched all last night with anxiety added to his load of fatigue."

Then I remembered the evil thoughts that had assailed me the evening before, on the march. Suddenly the vision I then had seen, of men and women bound together in a hateful, jealous conspiracy from which war alone could save them, was confronted with a new vision of simple men and women in a companionship of spirit capable of resisting life-long perplexities and unknown sufferings, a vision of supreme patience, of endurance, and a forlorn citadel in the heart against mysterious forces.

This vision mingled fantastically with the dancing glory of the June day, with the butterflies and the desire of the cuckoo's song, and with the spectacle of the sleeping men rendered insensible through their utter fatigue. But I bowed in spirit to Norton. Were we not companions in perplexity?

CHAPTER X

AN EARLY SOMME BATTLEFIELD

" L'armée est aveugle et muette. . . . C'est une grande chose que l'on meut, et qui tue; mais aussi c'est une chose qui souffre."—DE VIGNY.

THE brigade was in the area of the heavy guns, waiting to go into action. It was now early morning, and we had been waiting for a day and a night in very pleasant July weather, with no duty but that of not getting lost. If we cared to do so we could learn from the gunners, and also from the procedure of the guns themselves, that the assault had been a success. But we were not over inquisitive. Hearing plenty of lies, we cared to ask no questions, and if the authorities were not in a hurry, we were very happy sunning ourselves and receiving regular meals. During this anticlimax a friend of mine had read half a small volume picked up at Corby on the French Revolution. We sat together on an escarpment looking down the valley, and could see the crews of some big French guns. They were active men, who wore overalls like mechanics, and had the movements of mechanics rather than of soldiers.

" Have you ever thought," he said, " that leading such a life as this we are in a peculiar position for criticising books? In this way, that even platitudes

and truisms can be interesting if they can be referred to immediate experience. Take my case now. I read of Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité. I raise my eyes from these pages and see those little men in blue still replying to Brunswick's Manifesto. It's bloody interesting."

"I felt all that at Loos," I replied. "That was my age of Romance. But *all this* is Industrialism."

"And now," he continued, still lost in his book, "we are on the right side. On the side of Rousseau and Sieyès."

"You think we are really fighting for those—those ideas?"

"Yes. I am, anyway."

We were silent a moment, and then I said—

"Why have we no ideas of our own to fight for?"

He turned and seemed to consider my question.

"I suppose those are universal ideas."

"Which we arrive at a century late."

"Perhaps we are the grand experimenters of ideas. The ballast of the ship."

"But surely we are more than that now. Granted that we have always stood for liberty; but now we are more than standing, we are moving. We are on the side of revolution whether we will or no, on the side of the incalculable. And when nations move they follow ideas and those who can supply them. Are we still to be led by French ideas, by Geneva ideas, by Russian ideas? All true ideas are universal, but have we no great conception that is our own? Have we no British contribution?"

"I think we have one, but we are not conscious of it."

"Perhaps it is time we became conscious. Perhaps the world is waiting."

After which I left him to his dreams.

I had seen a Scotch sergeant of a pioneer battalion sitting with some of his men below us in the valley. He was a friend who had once been a patient under our care. He was a fierce-living fellow, with a questioning blue eye and a large pensive nose. He knew his native songs and poems by heart, and would contradict himself once every five minutes in any discussion. He knew also how to fight all day and dig trenches all night. Clambering downwards, I left my young friend with his book, sitting with the sun in his eyes, and so much spread before him for his contemplation. I left him with a feeling of regret as though he had been my younger self.

I sat down on a patch of grass beside Sergeant X.

"Wull," said he.

"Well," said I.

"How are your lads?"

"We follow the brigade."

"You'll have your work cut out."

"What's it going to be like . . . like Loos?"

"Christ knows, I don't."

After this greeting we had some discussion on the killing of prisoners. Sergeant X. snorted and declared if he had his way he'd kill every beggar of them. Then almost immediately he proclaimed

that they were only obeying orders, and he felt as sorry for them as for his own lads.

"There's a little chap in my platoon just done himself in," he added.

"Did you know him personally?"

"Yes, he was a good hard-working lad, who might have got his stripe after this do. We never saw anything wrong with him till a few weeks ago when he came back off leave. He got funny then, and said he couldn't go into action any more; said he saw dead bodies lying about everywhere."

"What did you say to him?"

"We were sorry for him. Told him not to poke and puzzle; but we didn't know how bad he was. Ye know there are lots of fellows get queer at times and pull through."

"Then one day he went to an officer and told him he couldn't go on killing his fellow-men."

"What did the officer say?" I asked.

"The officer. Christ! The officer played hell with him for coming up to him without an N.C.O. He shot himself that evening in the neck and chest. He's done for himself. But they interviewed him before he went down the line, and what do you think they gave out about him?"

"What?"

"That when he'd been on this last leave he'd found out his parents were German."

"Do you believe it?"

"German! No! He was no more German than I am! Anyway that's what they gave out about him."

We sat silent for a while, and then he turned his eye on me.

"Just think . . . if my dad told me he was a German. . . ."

"What would you do?"

"I'd shoot him."

"But you'd be a German too," I said.

"By God, I wouldn't!" he said fiercely.

We sat silent for a while, each with our own thoughts. There was an engineers' water-tap near-by under which a man with his tunic off, and his grey shirt-sleeves rolled up, was sluicing himself with enjoyment. He put his red neck under the tap and the water ran over his neck and through his hair and made puddles on the ground at his feet.

Then Sergeant X. said, "What are those chaps looking at up there?" He pointed with his finger, and I saw a little group of our men standing round some object of interest. We rose from our seat, and strolled towards the group. I could not help thinking, as we went, of the strange sequence of Fate that had presented this story to me at this time, a gift to carry on to the battlefield.

"They're gaping at a couple of Fritzes," said Sergeant X. as we drew nearer the group, and almost immediately he left me with a short word of farewell. But something in the position of the onlookers attracted me. I approached and found two German prisoners. They were the first Somme prisoners I had seen.

One lay on his back on a stretcher. He was a

young man with a thin, nervous face, high forehead and dark, narrow eyes. His arm lay off the stretcher, and he rested the back of his hand on the earth. He seemed to regard no one and nothing, betrayed no pain, and apparently listened without interest to the words of his companion. The second prisoner was the more remarkable of the two. He crouched, half kneeling, half sitting, beside the stretcher, talking volubly in a position turned towards the wounded one. His conversation stopped at intervals, and he would look upwards, turning his eyes slowly round the circle of British faces. Sometimes he drew with his fingers in the earth in front of him. There was something in his eyes not quite human. It was probably due to the fact of having endured a long period of shell-fire. He frequently smiled and looked happy. Both he and his companion were in colour grey as their uniforms, but their eyes shone with life.

But what was strange was that we were not the ordinary gaping inquisitive crowd. They were indifferent to us, yet they had moved us. We kept silence while that crouching figure spoke, in his strange tongue, as though to himself.

It frequently happens on active service that long periods of monotonous existence, every detail of which is forgotten, are broken by some such short memorable spell. We listened in a kind of awe. It was as if you could detect that some drama hidden from common sight had risen suddenly to a crisis, for the moment arresting all observers and

expressing nakedly those great forces which in other channels can send an artist mad, or lift a theatre to its feet.

Men kept joining and leaving the group. There seemed to be no sentry over the two prisoners. The wretched, ragged, yet talkative being continued to converse and to smile to himself. I think he held us because the result of his behaviour was to express a terrible shy compassion for his wounded companion. He seemed to behave as an affectionate, intelligent dog might behave finding himself for the first time in human shape beside a beloved master. Thus he seemed to make use of human speech, human smiles.

"All his buttons are gone all right," said some one.

"He looks like Jesus Christ," said another.

The youth on the stretcher groaned and asked for something in German. The crouching one looked up and said, "De l'eau." A water-bottle was brought. He watched through our legs till it came. In return he took off his cap and with a kind of abject dignity handed it to one of us. It was passed round, inspected, and finally replaced on his head with a patronising pat.

He went on talking for some time to his friend, who continued to look away from him into vacancy.

It was perhaps an hour later that I saw them again. The brigade had moved at last. Our brief period of peace had come to an end, and a party of us with stretchers were preparing to go forward

into the unknown land: the land from which those two incomprehensible creatures had come.

We passed them for a moment. The prisoner who had lain silent had been placed in an ambulance car about to start. Then I caught a glimpse of the other as he ran forward and took a seat beside the driver. He looked mad and happy. The car jolted off. They were gone.

We left even the thought of them behind. The threads of our lives had crossed, unaccountably linked, and diverged again. But we were soon to make hideous discoveries of the land they had come from. We were walking in file carrying stretchers, and haversacks filled with dressings. The dressing-station where we had camped that night was the last place where lint, wool or bandages could be supplied. We followed an old railway line up a shallow valley, and presently left behind us the last trees and bushes wearing leaves. At the same time shell-holes increased in number. I had known this valley and railway line a few weeks before, but then we were down in the trenches peeping out at risk, making maps in a labyrinth. Now we walked forward seeing all things. First we came to what had been our front line trenches, the frontier of France for eighteen months and more. A hundred yards ahead was what had been the frontier of Germany, but was so no longer. We halted here for a while. The morning had ripened into a heavy leaden forenoon. The atmosphere seemed to suggest that the gigantic storm, that had but lately finished its wreckage here, had left a brood-

ing swell. As we stood the guns were silent. There was silence and the mute witness of the dead. The earth was hideous, eyeless, burnt blind. In our forsaken trenches the rats reigned supreme.

Presently we continued our way, still following the railway line across that hundred yards that had once been no-man's-land, dividing the opposites of Europe. We had already passed brown corpses, but here almost immediately the grey corpses began to appear. How can I describe this stretch of earth, at that moment almost untouched by the wheels and hoofs of our advance? For so many months it had been known to men only by night. By day the corpses on their backs, hummed over by bullets, had faced the sky alone. But every sundown the place had stolen into ghoulish life. The cramped snipers, the crawling patrols, the listeners shivering at their posts had all been here, had pressed through this grass, had mistaken the rustling of these bushes for the breathing of an enemy. I could mark no insect, no bird anywhere. The rank brown tangled grass, the thistles, the hideous growths of barbed wire holding human remains like flies in spiders' webs, were all part of an underworld unfamiliar to a creature still blessed with the sweet union of soul and body. I longed for a cleansing wind to blow away a sense of gross mysticism, of adultery between the Seen and the Unseen. The place seemed ghost-ridden in broad day. We found German dead far out in no-man's-land. They had doubtless crawled further and further away from the terrible and increasing surf

of shells that pervaded their own lines for days before the attack. But reaching the German firing-trench, there was no lack either of our own dead or of the tales dead men can tell. Here is a soldier who looks as if he had just sat down a moment to die. Here is one looking at his watch. Here is a strange record of a disappointment: a British and a German soldier, both already wounded, have evidently made terrible efforts to get at each other. With hatred in the face of each, they had just reached to within arm's length, not after all to fight, but both to be subdued in death.

In the old front line of the enemy, or what remains of it, we halted and prepared a temporary dressing-station. Those dug-outs that were not destroyed were cleaned. The place was a labyrinth, gruesome enough in its débris and flavour as of the tombs. At corners and junctions of trenches we were confronted with little notice-boards in neat German characters. At one point there remained fixed into the trench wall a memorial tablet of wood, carved with a Gothic trefoil, and inscribed to some soldier of the Vaterland. At the point where the railway line crossed the trench system we set a water tank, and made a cook-house. We were a little colony of living among troops of the dead. Right and left, backwards and forwards, round every corner, lay the grey bodies. They were not conspicuous, but they were there. At night on duty with a covered lamp and a surgical haversack when the stumbling stretcher-bearers had gone for the moment, and when thick snores came up

from dug-outs where soldiers slept, the stars shone down upon us and pin-points of thought woke and danced in my mind. We could not see *them*, but round those shadowy corners *they* could be felt. They had not dwelt here so long without leaving their print on the air. The place was theirs still; only they were dead. Sitting on a petrol tin, I leaned back and touched the trench wall with my head. Suddenly there ran a slight shiver through the air. What fancies were these—the dead had responded? But to what? The sound, whatever it was, remained. It was also familiar. It was like the humming of the railway lines above us. A far-away screech as of an engine sounded and drew nearer. Of course, it was only the screech of a heavy shell going over. Besides, the rails had been torn up for yards. But still, against all reason, a train was approaching down the valley from the direction of the enemy. Also there was now another sound—of footfalls in the trenches all around. The ghost train came on and ran above us—an engine and a series of old third-class coaches, dilapidated and with broken windows. With muffled brakes the thing came to a standstill behind us in no-man's-land. *They* were now coming out from all sides, crowding and lurching down the trenches, without arms, without faces (I remember one had a head like a paint-brush), and ran out into no-man's-land. There were plenty of bullets about at night: but of course *they* did not mind. The dead besieged the doors of the train and crowded in. So much the better, thought I, we shall not

have to bury them. I felt an irresistible curiosity to know who the engine-driver might be; and crept forward, therefore, by an advance trench to get a nearer view. I noticed that some one had written *Paris* in chalk on the carriage doors. There was a faint hissing ahead, and presently I caught a horrid glimpse of the engine-driver himself. The fire-box door was open and illuminated him. He leaned quite professionally on the side of his engine, and rested his chin on his hand. What disturbed me was that though grotesque and sinister, he was yet familiar. I had seen him before—somewhere. He gravely surveyed the jostling crowd who so ludicrously strove to open doors without arms or climb into the carriages without feet. He had little horns on his head, and his strong arms seemed adapted to stoking a fire. Suddenly I recognised him. The shock brought me to my senses again. I had only dreamed that the engine-driver was the *Penseur of Notre Dame.*

* * * * * *

Next morning I saw an officer's servant I knew sitting at the mouth of his dug-out, writing in his diary. (It was at one time very fashionable to keep diaries.) I asked him what he was writing.

"The Germans," he said. "Me and 'im spent a orful night."

By "'im" he referred to his officer.

"How?" said I anxiously.

"Well, so far we've always had lice, but lice only. Now first thing in these 'ere dug-outs . . .

first night . . . a flea . . . a blinkin' German flea."

But the aspect of death, so striking at first, was soon worn from the land by ceaseless traffic and activities. No-man's-land soon became every-man's land. Batteries, French and English, grow up on all sides. Convoys appear, halt in lines, and a loitering mule snuffs the rank grass. The smoke rises from cook-house fires. A motor-cyclist falls off in front of you and wants to know where he is. A colonel of artillery sends an orderly for some aspirin.

It is always worth while to watch a battery of French seventy-fives take up a position. With whips, shouts, and *cris de joie* they like, where possible, to gallop and wheel into line. Then bestowing their packs and coffee-mills in a suitable place, the gunners—themselves clothed in conspicuous blue, with here and there a red sash—will seek to disguise their guns by sprinkling a little grass over them. This done, they will turn their handles like so many barrel organs and wake the echoes with a stream of twenty rounds or so, just to let the Boches know what to expect later on; and so to cards without further delay.

Before leaving the old German front line, it is interesting to look back from the German sniping-posts, and see how fine a view they commanded. There was our communication trench zigzagging down the hill opposite, and there was the road on

its crest, with its row of trees and gaps in the hedge, past which we used to walk and hope that the snipers were asleep. It seems on the whole as well that they were. There was the narrow sunken road, from which only a week ago we watched the destruction of the enemy's barbed wire by our guns—this wire now in front of us.

Meanwhile the railway line has been patched by the R.E. men, who place bits of wood where rails are missing and who contrive ingenious wooden points at likely places where trolleys may have an opportunity of trying to go in two directions at once. Traffic soon starts on this line. The wounded go down the valley. Tanks of water and stores of all kinds come up.

Higher up the line some of our men are working an advanced dressing-station in an old German communication trench. As usual it is surrounded by our guns, and is shelled by the enemy a whole summer day. Within the A.D.S. the dressers, with rolled-up sleeves, cut their white and cyanide gauze, count their remaining splints, and see to it that their precious solutions of eusol are not wasted. There is usually a little crowd of bearers outside, hot and panting, newly arrived with a load, or taking fresh stretchers from the pile and mustering their strength for a new journey. Few people realise the aching, overmastering fatigue of stretcher-bearing after long, unrelieved hours.

The wounded, when properly dressed, labelled and passed by an officer, are carried across to the railway line to a point at which a little flag waves,

and are thence despatched on the trolleys back to the cars, and so down—

"To where the dripping surgeons wait,"

and if they get so far they may well get further, so good luck go with them.

Though there were moments when we looked back enviously after those we had dispatched in hope, all life, all curiosity impelled forward. For are we not helping at the greatest travelling accident that has so far happened to Civilisation? Even we—the rank and file of the R.A.M.C., abused and abusive—have our moments of secret devotion.

A squad of eight of us went, wearily enough, at the close of an eventful day to relieve the last squad helping the regimental stretcher-bearers on one of the battalion fronts. We were taken by one of our officers to the trench and found the aid-post from which we were to work. The battalion M.O. was a thin, pale man, with deep brown eyes, whose face was lined and ashy with lack of sleep. He had a gentle abstracted manner, and a high voice. So great was his fatigue that every least action and decision required an obvious effort of will almost painful to observe. One of our squad had learnt from one of the last squad that he was " a fine man, a Christian, and would talk religion."

The trench, a shallow reserve of the Germans, was fairly heavily shelled and gave little protection, but he paid not the slightest heed to the bombardment. He examined the surgical haversacks we had brought with satisfaction, and asked

himself aloud whether he had a sufficient store of iodine.

In such times and places human life rests on the simplest of medical expedients. The advanced dressing-station may reflect the latest scientific theory and provide eusol on the Somme, where perchloride was used ten months before at Loos. But the aid-post, as a rule, retains the time-honoured iodine bottle.

The M.O.'s vague and expressionless face made me feel uneasy, but an incident occurred that showed him in his true colours. A heavy shell dropped in the trench. Many were killed and injured, and for an instant all was panic. The first thing I saw on regaining my feet was an officer lying on his back, with the M.O. bending over him. Other bodies lay beyond. We raised the patient and found a terrible abdominal wound. One of our men ran up with a bag of shell dressings. The M.O. bound him round, using two or three of the dressings, and repeated that he had known worse cases survive.

"He is acting adjutant," he said. "He is one of the few remaining officers. Get him operated on at once—go with him yourself." What was magnificent was his determination in the face of despair, for he must have seen, as I could see, that the patient was nearly dead already. As we stumbled off with the stretcher he almost shrieked after me to keep him alive.

But the order was not one I could carry out. Before we reached the A.D.S. the patient expired.

We lowered the stretcher a moment to rest. I closed his eyes. He was a young man, fearfully wasted, but looking noble and restful in death.

When we returned to the trench again we found it had been evacuated by all but a machine-gun squad and ourselves. We were still to use one end of it as an aid-post. Presently, besides the enemy shells that had increased in number, some of our own shells began to drop short just behind us. I sat down for a moment and asked myself if this was despair! It had an effect on the nerves, yet it was infinitely dull and uninteresting. At the end of long and arduous days to be playfully done in by our own shells was all part of the cynical game as we saw it—part of the soldier's burden, the burden of insignificance.

But such were not the thoughts of the M.O., who came along the trench in a casual way much as though he were looking for a collar stud. Suddenly the new sound behind us caught his ear.

"What's that?" said he. "Aren't those our own shells falling short?"

"Yes," said I.

"What nonsense," said he. "We'll soon stop that; where's the nearest telephone?"

He went off, and before very long the shells in our rear ceased to fall. Some wit suggested he might have telephoned in the opposite direction as well *while he was about it.*

At one point we looked up and in the evening sky above us we saw a couple of English aeroplanes swooping down upon a German, who descended in

circles trying to escape. Was there no place in this material scheme, so clung to by all of us, that was not free from the desire of death?

We were all anxious for the M.O. to get some sleep that night. Small bunks or funk-holes had been dug in the side of the trench, and one of these we enlarged and filled with dry sandbags and sacking. Here we hoped he was fairly warm and comfortable. The high explosive shells thumped upon us all night, but there was only one call for stretcher-bearers.

Next day was something of a respite. The battalion rations seemed excellent in quality. Sandbags containing bacon, onions, bread, tea, butter, milk and quince jam were regularly forthcoming. The quince jam was at that time, for a few weeks, very popular. It came in round tins, in colour a pleasing green, and in shape very different to the usual Tickler's tin of plum and apple. On opening it, wine-coloured depths of preserved and juicy fruits were revealed. I dozed in the early morning, enjoying the absence of shells; but presently a sizzling and a delicious smell greeted me. The machine-gun squad proved themselves gentlemen of high standing in the humanities of war. They had been friends together in private life in the same city; had belonged to the same athletic club, and had doubtless ridden each other's motor-bicycles. The same kind of consideration they extended to us as if we had joined their club or were taking tea with them after a cross-country run. The fireplace in the trench wall was dug slightly larger and a fire adequate for boiling four

mess-tins was made. The mess-tins, German ones, were then hung on two bayonets over the fire. In the early Somme fighting, though the British were victorious in arms, a little kultur victory was achieved by Germany. For several weeks we took over the German mess-tin and discarded our own. On account of its light weight, capacity, and design, it proved itself superior and won our approval—for we were all quick to detect anything making for comfort. Thus two German mess-tins could boil where one boiled before, or, in this case, four Germans instead of two English.

That day passed in comparative peace, remarkable for its few casualties, for its showers and a burst of sunshine. Towards night the M.O., after a long absence, appeared before us on the parapet. He was wearing a cape, and his pale face looked paler in the gloom. We felt that day had been a calm before the real storm. Looking down upon us he ordered us to sling our haversacks, and, with our stretchers and remaining rations, follow him to a new position. He walked ahead and led in the direction of B. Wood, that lay upon our left.

* * * * * *

The trees of B. Wood had long ago surrendered their midsummer leaves, and in the dusk held up their stark branches as though asking mercy of the smouldering sky. Looking upwards you could see a lonely leaf flapping. Stars and rags seemed caught in the boughs. To the commoner wilderness of death this place was as a step forward into hell; where forms of fear had their haunts and evil spirits, all but visible, moved in their own paths.

The menace of outraged Nature breathed in the startling odour of sap from thousands of bruised tree trunks. Corpses of trees and men mingled corruption, and their limbs lay equally broken.

The M.O., wearing his cape, walked ahead. We had entered the wood from the corner near the cross roads, and were now wending our way after him. The place was quiet that evening: only an occasional shell fell and echoed. Sticks snapped under our feet. We came at last to a clearing, and descended to a trench that ran left and right. It was one of the two trenches, running the length of the wood, which were held by our battalion. This trench must have been eight or nine feet deep, and was so narrow that a stretcher fully open could not pass along it. But we had not far to go before we turned sharp, descended a little passage and found ourselves in a good dug-out roofed with three layers of tree-trunks, very solidly set. This was our new aid-post.

The enemy knew every corner of the wood: they had the range of the trench and the position of the dug-out accurately, but the excellence of their own workmanship protected us. The only mistake, from our point of view, was that the door now faced front, so that a shell by ill luck might have fallen in the entrance.

Next morning a reserve battalion made an attack over the heads of our battalion, who thus became a reserve in their turn. The enemy's barrage fire grew thick and continuous, and the wood maintained its sinister tradition. Shells of all kinds flew screaming into it as to their natural home.

The dug-out was soon filled with wounded, who came crawling along the trenches or who were brought in by the stretcher-bearers for treatment. To get them in and out of the dug-out was difficult enough, but the real struggle was getting loaded stretchers across the mud, roots, and fallen timber in the wood. Progress was so slow and painful that wherever possible four bearers went with a stretcher as far as the cross roads; whence two would return to the aid-post. For a couple of hours, however, owing to the intense shelling, our operations were suspended. Down in the dug-out the M.O. worked cheerfully, though he looked on the verge of collapse from fatigue. Albert, one of our bearers, who was an excellent dresser, quite unperturbed under such conditions, remained to help. Albert had plenty of work, but I fancy he chiefly remembers searching continuously for the iodine bottle, which in the crowd and the semi-darkness was always getting lost. Immersed in our work, we came to feel that time had stopped, and that we were engaged in a void of blood and mud and noise. The creepers hanging down over the entrance moved in the draught from shell after shell. The crash of falling boughs sounded continually, and faces wild with terror appeared and disappeared at the entrance to the dug-out. Although the iodine bottle continued to elude him, the M.O. never swore. On one occasion, after a crash that sounded immediately over us, he remarked quietly, "The Saviour loves us." Certainly Death with a monstrous axe seemed to be striding in the wood above us. The wounded

huddled themselves into corners as far as possible from the door. I went out, on one occasion, into the trench and saw that the troops were on the verge of panic. The strain of enduring for hours together the peculiar nameless horror of this place without any allaying occupation was too much for flesh and blood. Then it was that something wonderful happened. In a lull of a few seconds a bird sang three notes. They were notes full and unbearably sweet, and had an effect indescribable upon those who heard them. Oh, Life! Exquisite and fantastic Spirit! Now we might live or die, but we had heard the nightingale as surely as that monk of old who listened once and found himself an old man. We are old too. With death, despair and dullness we are utterly familiar. Yet nearer, more familiar, closer to our souls than death to our bodies art Thou who singest. What matter three notes or a century of song?

The storm closed over us again, and the next thing I remember was the figure of a man mad with terror who rushed into the dug-out holding his back and shouting, "I'm hit in the liver, I'm hit in the liver." The M.O. silenced him at once. He had been badly bruised in the back and now sat whimpering in a corner, but he was temporarily insane through fright. As I was to go back on a message for the M.O., I took him and another wounded man with me. The other patient had been badly hurt in the foot, but he took my arm and walked with assistance. He was a small, conscientious man, who talked continually and cheerfully as we picked our way through the trees and

shrubs or strove to stand upright in the mud. But the madman ran ahead, crying to us and waving his arms. We went very slowly, and would overtake him at cross paths where he crouched behind a tree-trunk, peeping out like a hare. The branches here and there had been bent into fantastic shapes resembling bowers and trellises. Shrapnel burst frequently over us and made a strange knocking sound against the timber. Boughs and whole trees crashed to the ground, and the sound rang and mingled with homeless echoes. In the pitiless light of day the wood was more terrible than at dusk when the eye could not penetrate its naked aisles: the smell of sap persisted like a poison in the nostrils.

But the barrage was more intense behind the wood. I gave the madman directions as to getting to the nearest communication trench, and he flew off at once, though we told him he was safer with us. We never knew whether he reached the A.D.S. in safety. He on my arm smiled and apologised for going so slowly, though each step must have hurt him. He maintained his conversation in an even voice, and mentioned that he had left his best friend behind him.

"Eh, but he were a good pal to me," said he.

As we passed the cross roads the shells were falling fairly thick, and we pulled our helmets well down over the nape of the neck. Meanwhile the conversation had taken a religious turn, and I heard him say that he believed in Christ very firmly, and so was not troubled with personal fear. As he spoke a large shell, known as a coal-box, fell

about twenty feet on our right. Clods of earth pelted us, and the smoke rose like genii from a bottle. The thought occurred to both of us that the thing was an apparition of evil taking its place captiously beside his declaration of faith. He raised his collar as though at a thunder shower. With his arm in mine I did not even feel surprised at the absence in myself of the common sensations of fear. We did not alter our pace, and in about ten minutes had crossed the barrage area. When we came near the advanced dressing-station I directed him and said good-bye. I had never met as brave a man.

On my return journey I had occasion to pass the trench where the day before we had held our aid-post, and where we had eaten quince jam. I found with horror that the place was now obliterated by shells, and that the machine-gun squad, our hosts, were nowhere to be found. I remembered guiltily that I had wanted to remain in this place, and paid a mental tribute to the M.O.'s instincts in such matters.

Then I continued my return journey to B. Wood, following the same route, familiar by now. First came the shallow communication trench, then the open fields, then the cross roads with its drunken sign-board and shell-pitted pavement.

But it was no longer for me a place of terror.

As before, the genii arose captiously on every side, the air was full of uncouth sounds; but it was here that that wounded man on my arm had spoken his astonishing words and delivered me from the tyranny of fear.

I, too, had believed as he had believed; but it seemed marvellous and as though I had read it in a tale, that I should have been bound with one at such a moment whose faith was greater than my own.

I reached the corner of the wood and paused for a moment. The poisonous odour of sap greeted me, and at once the figure of that other man maddened by fear seemed to peep at me round the tree trunks.

Then countless other dryads appeared, terror-haunted, and amongst them the figure of that German prisoner, mad and compassionate, who had knelt beside his friend, and whose lunatic eyes prophesied to us what we in our turn would have to endure.

And what of these?

Is there any triumph for the grown man rejoicing in the strength of his own spirit or of God's, while hundreds of children, while one child is driven mad beside him?

Rather there is more mercy in these blundering shells, more truth in three notes of a bird sung in the storm, than in all the half-creeds and half-righteousness of men.

Here in this scar across Europe, between the opposing lines of guns, I knew that both the strong and the weak offered equally to a spiritual God their courage and their terror in protest against every false compromise between good and evil that has gone to produce—this.

CHAPTER XI

"WHAT IS YOUR RELIGION?"

"And solemn before us,
Veiled, the dark Portal,
Goal of all mortal:—
Stars silent rest o'er us,
Graves under us silent."[22]

GOETHE.

IN the hot July night the night Sister came slowly up the ward between the beds. She had passed down a few minutes ago; now she was coming back. She moved like a figure of fate, the shaded lamp she carried in her hand shone on the underside of her chin and on the tip of her nose. Some of the patients groaned in their sleep. Others watched her apathetically as she passed.

I whispered to myself, "She likes the Australian in the next bed better than she likes me." Then suddenly I fell through a pit into a restless land, which was a method of going to sleep.

I was very busy carrying my own leg on a stretcher through Montauban. Chatham was the other bearer, and Albert walked beside me repeating, "It's all right, Sergeant. It's all right." At times we halted and lay flat on the ground and began talking about various irrelevant things, while flights of gas shells passed over us with a long screaming sound which never stopped. We went on through a shapeless land; but when I

cried "Halt," Chatham would not obey me any more and presently I realised that I was on the stretcher myself. I said good-bye to my two friends and felt very sorry to leave them. I was now in the company of others and we seemed to be rumbling and rolling along a trolley track. Lifting my head I saw another man beside me on a stretcher and recognised him as a gunner we had ourselves brought in an hour before.

"We meet again," I said.

He did not reply. He was terribly changed in so short a space of time, but I recognised him perfectly.

When we came to the ambulance cars, or flying mortuaries, as the orderlies called them, we were taken off the trolley and laid on the ground. The orderlies lifted us and moved us about in an unconcerned manner, shouting and talking to each other as they did so. "I suppose I looked and talked like that when I was one of them," I thought.

But the gunner was not put in a car with the rest of us.

"He's dead," said an orderly.

Then began a very long jolting drive. I could not help thinking of the gunner whom I had caught up on his last journey for no apparent reason, unless it were to see him die. He had been knocked over by a shell on the road near our dressing-station, where we found him lying on his back looking quietly up at the sky. He had a leg off at the knee. "It's funny how differently men take it," I thought. "Some will call for their

mother for two hours. Some will lie like this, like children on their backs in the grass."

Then when we had brought him to the dressing-station the officer swore at me for looking at him and doing nothing. Others dressed him, not I; I could only look at him and loiter about. When he and other patients had been carried away there was an interval of about twenty minutes before the shell fell, during which the station was free of patients. During that time I realised we were all half dead with fatigue. We stood about, moved from one place to another, and stood again, like pawns in a game, waiting. Then I went down into cavernous shadows. What if that shell need never have fallen, killing none but our own bearers, killing my brothers? I seemed at grips with Destiny herself, like a lunatic wrestling with a tree.

Presently I found Mack beside me in the car. Other friends had come to say good-bye, but Mack remained beside me for no other reason but that that was his character. He talked in an even voice and I seemed to steal strength from him for the journey before me. Then he, too, said good-bye and returned to his corner of that evil land as Chatham and Albert had done.

For a long while I was alone in a horizontal crowd, all flowing in the same direction. Once I spoke to the man next me, a sergeant-major who was covered with wounds. He was an elderly man with a quiet fatherly manner. His conversation grew less and less, and presently he grew worse. They stopped the ambulance train and

left him. "Change here for Heaven," said a witty orderly. We started again. From my position on the floor of the train I continued to watch the tops of the poplar trees pass by one after one.

Then another orderly with an enormous book came along jotting down our religions. "What is your religion?" he roared in my ear. The thumping of the train suddenly became intolerably painful. I sat up and found myself awake, staring at the night Sister, who came towards me without altering her quiet deliberate pace.

"Did you call for me?"

"No, Sister."

"As you are awake now I will do your dressing."

The saline dressing was very painful and fatiguing. The night orderly held the lamp while the Sister unbandaged my leg. She was highly trained and all her movements were quick and even, but not mechanical. She had also preserved a disciplined sympathy which is quickly detected by patients, however sternly it is overlaid. To suffer pain from others is soon to perceive their character. This woman did her work inexorably, but the pain brought no resentment with it. I could see the orderly's profile as he held up the lamp. He often glanced at me over his shoulder with a look half inquisitive, half professional. When the dressing was over I waited expectantly for a mug of warm milk. Every night I was afraid she would forget, but she always remembered. To-night she also brought two tablets of aspirin.

I fell again through a sudden hole into another realm. But this time I dreamed I was dead.

I passed several beings, one of whom came close to me and said, "I'm very sorry for all you young fellows, you haven't had much of a time."

I acknowledged him vaguely and went forward, moved by a pleasant impulse like that of going to meet friends.

Then another person met me and accompanied me on my way. He spoke reasonably and I felt a rare pleasure—that of listening to, and following, a powerful and enlightened mind and understanding each step in his discourse. At every step I weighed the idea he put forward as impartially as if it had been my own, and at each step the joy of perception and understanding increased.

At one point the path seemed difficult. I took his arm and the movement was familiar. I wondered whether we were walking or thinking, our progress seemed as much a thing of the mind as of the body. The enjoyment connected with it was an athletic enjoyment.

At one point, in reply to some difficulty I had put forward, he replied, "You have still the idea of suffering too much behind all your thoughts. Of course, it is natural, seeing what your activities and those of your friends have been. On earth men are much concerned with suffering and have coupled it with their highest achievements, with Love and with Knowledge. Consider the Poet of Galilee. Men have recognised his idea of a

Kingdom as a great achievement, they have called it a Revelation, yet they have emphasised his suffering above the suffering of others.

"Men have instituted a realm of suffering called Hell, and many of their finest minds have been more interested in it than in Heaven. Heaven where there is no suffering—as they conceive it—fails to interest them. They have chosen a word to stand for their conception of Heaven—a word which has become almost a term of contempt—Utopia. Yet you will follow me, I am sure, when I say that the amount of suffering men have added to the Galilean Idea is a measure of the importance they attach to it. Rather than think of it in the light of Utopia, they have coupled it with untold suffering and sacrifice.

"Men dread *Security* more than they dread *Insecurity*. That is the cause of their hatred of Utopia and of their mistrust of Heaven. Suffering is insisted upon as a token of the risk without which life is considered undesirable."

"Undesirable!" I cried, "it is only because they lack imagination. Desire follows upon vision . . . I believe that. . . ."

"You have faith," he replied. "But men can attain what they truly desire."

It was here that the path seemed difficult, and I took his arm. Presently he laid a curious image before me.

"You all remind me," he said, "of men sitting blindfolded engaged in a life's work of reading in braille and studying existence by that means,

with incredible labour, when you have nothing to do but untie your own bandages and use your own eyes.

"Now the mastery in braille achieved by some minds is magnificent, nay, stupendous. By its means they have perceived nearly every phenomenon of life except light. But their achievement and their tragedy go hand-in-hand, for presently they forget that they have eyes, and some of them truly go blind.

"The Poet of Galilee, who identified himself completely with his Idea, called himself the Light of the World. He pointed out once and for all that the simple man who has never blindfolded his eyes, or the wise man who has torn off his bandages, and trusts his own vision, is wiser than the most accomplished scholar of life in braille. For this vision, this direct perception of Life, means to have nothing interposed between yourself and IT, means to mingle with it, to live it in the very act of perceiving it. By this means Desire and Vision are perceived to be the same. By this means only consciousness of Life and Life itself can go forward hand-in-hand, and happiness rather than suffering takes its place with Knowledge.

"Wherever consciousness of Life becomes separated from Life itself suffering is insisted upon as a value rather than joy: and it has been the mark of some of the very finest and most penetrating minds. But it is false to ascribe that suffering to the Poet of Galilee. Men have attributed to him their own weakness. He is the man

of all others whose capacity for life is equal to his consciousness of it.

"For you and the uncounted ones you love, sunk in the sufferings of your time, do not be misled by those sufferings. All your discoveries, all your activities must now be in the direction of Life itself.

"Remember joy."

The word leaped in my brain. Ah! I had really forgotten, not the word, but the thought. Joy, peace, good-will! I turned, but my companion had gone.

I pondered the thought he had left with me, and it begot in my mind a desire for companionship. All at once I seemed to emerge upon a sunny pathway where there was short grass under my feet.

Around me on all sides now expanded the loveliest landscape, in which natural objects appeared to me so transfigured, yet so familiar, that on beholding them I felt a lifetime of twilight had come suddenly to an end. The radiant air filled all interspaces with a beauty of its own. The grass path on which I found myself was bordered on each side by very rich deep grass in which at times I caught little gulfs of blue as of gentians. The trees were of the two kinds I loved, tall aspiring French poplars and aspens, standing in groups and yielding to each other in magnificence, and in other directions the broad English oak islanded in the grass and complete in itself.

At first I did not notice the sound of birds, for there was no special note to attract attention.

Then gradually there was revealed a morning throbbing, as it were the essence of sound itself, in which when I listened attentively all varieties of notes could be distinguished: the long flute of the thrush, the happy-hearted cheeps and chirpings of the finches, the dream-calling of the warblers, and sounding above and through the whole, certain eternal overtones coming from myriads of humbler little voices.

As with sound, so with light; objects near and far were seen with the same delicacy as on a distant hill-side. Light seemed not concerned to show the boundaries of things, but to shine through each and all. By an effort of thought, individual shapes and colours could be perceived and intensely enjoyed, but with a kind of exotic enjoyment as of a swimmer who lingers before his plunge.

Then I realised as I looked and listened that I did not truly desire to make distinctions or to seek out one impression lovelier than another. I recognised at last that what was so exquisitely familiar as to fill me with the profoundest joy, was the experience of harmony.

A group of men came towards me along the grass path, occupied with shouting at the top of their voices, laughing, and making conversation. I recognised them almost immediately as some friends I had long held jealously in my mind. Joe was amongst them, the first of us to be killed on the Somme, Conlan, who was killed at the water-cart, Binny, who used to sing Scotch songs, and other stretcher-bearers who had been killed.

A well-known voice came to my ears : " Sergeant. . . . Why, here's Sergeant," and I quickened my pace towards them with a feeling of indescribable joy. But before I could reach them, a grotesque figure made a sudden appearance beside me and began asking me fussy questions. When I first saw him my heart sank. He asked me what my religion was and I burst out laughing. Then he said he was an Army Chaplain and very worried because some of his C. of E. boys refused to rise again. " They won't rise again," he repeated mournfully.

The voices of my friends now seemed very near, but I knew that this was so ridiculous that I must be dreaming.

" They won't rise again, though I mentioned the ' atonement,' " wailed the voice in my ear, and almost immediately I felt myself surrounded by walls of pain.

I woke.

* * * * *

The day's work had begun in the ward though the light was scarcely more than twilight. I stared in front of me for some time while I tried a more comfortable position for my splint. Then I turned to see if the man in the next bed was awake.

He was an Australian, known as No. 34, that being the number of his bed. He was now sleeping very lightly and I could almost see his eyes through his transparent eyelids. Sleep visited him less even than she visited me. I knew that in a few moments he, too, would be awake and glancing up

and down the ward in his restless way searching for any object of interest.

I had conceived a great admiration for this man and used to lend him my safety razor. When he was asleep like this I realised by comparison his extraordinary vitality. He was not subdued or irritated by pain, but appeared to flicker in and out of consciousness; when he was not talking or laughing he lay thus like an extinct volcano, asleep or with closed eyes.

Looking up and down the ward I could see who were awake and who were enviably asleep.

"That chap opposite sleeps all day and all night," I thought irritably.

Pat, the Irish Fusilier in the special bed, was awake. He was the show patient of the ward, and used to be allowed an ounce of champagne with his dinner. Distinguished visitors always stopped opposite his bed. He had frequent painful dressings against which he used to protest too much, so that nobody minded him.

Now he was lifting his arms up and down like a child and humming to himself.

Next him came a very thin man, an Englishman, with a leg that might have to come off: a man who suffered a good deal, but who never made a sound and who used to bite his blankets during his dressings. Next came a wild Canadian, always called Happy, who never spoke but at the top of his voice and who slept all night like a top. Next him came a little Scotchman with deep parallel lines on his forehead, who had been in hospital as

long as Pat, and who gave vent to bitter thoughts. My immediate companions included three Australians, No. 34 on my right, one on my left called No. 33, and a middle-aged Australian farmer opposite who had a fatherly manner and was only slightly wounded.

This was our community, consisting chiefly of leg cases. But beyond our land of legs lay other zones with other inhabitants, of whom we had vague reports from time to time, notably of one who had lain for five days in No Man's Land, and of another who owned three chintz bags full of personal kit.

The fatherly Australian opposite was awake. I caught his eye across the bed-clothes. We were thinking of the same thing.

"Is that cup of tea coming round this morning?"

"I hope so—it's the best meal in the day."

"If I don't get it, I don't shave to-day, that's all about it," I said.

Shaving was a fatigue, like reading, like having one's bed made, like writing home, like everything in life.

But we were not disappointed. Wee Willy, the up-patient, who was as useful in the ward as three orderlies, came skipping along the beds with mugs in both hands. I watched him coming as an animal at the Zoo watches a visitor with buns. He left a mug with me half full of freshly brewed tea. I drank it, and felt immediately that I would like to read a book, then I changed my mind and decided to think.

"What pudding is it for dinner to-day?" I thought. "Is it apples after dinner, or had we them yesterday?"

My Australian friend on my right suddenly opened his eyes and tried to sit up.

"By Jesus!" he declared. "Have I been asleep?"

At that moment the night Sister came up with a thermometer and silenced me by putting it into my mouth while No. 34 had a conversation with her. He said his leg was giving him *jip*. She immediately went down on her knees beside him and began arranging small pillows round his splint.

With the thermometer in my mouth I watched her angrily. She spoke little, but after each arrangement of pillows she looked inquiringly at No. 34 with her fine gentle eyes.

"Of course," I thought, "she likes him for his wildness and wit, and because he's an Australian. Wish I was an Australian. . . . He has probably forgotten that he has to decide to-day whether to have his leg off or not. But why not take a little notice of me too? . . . Women are all like that, all have their favourites . . . all take the personal attitude. . . ."

No. 34 thanked her and said he felt easier. "By gum, I wish you'd stay on duty and do my day dressings. The other woman's got fingers like claws."

We all knew he alluded to the day Sister.

Up the ward from the other side now came a very tall willowy lady, with a patient face. She

was dressed distinctively as a superintendent, and she was making her morning rounds. She carried three sweet peas in her hand.

She graciously noticed each patient as she came along.

"No. 33," she said to the patient on my left. "How is No. 33 this morning? No. 19" (to me), "how's the leg? No. 34, you slept a little, I hear. What, not slept at all? I call you three the three legs. It's Sunday morning and the sun is shining."

Thus she murmured to us and passed on. But she had left the three sweet peas with me.

"Of course," I thought, "the point about women is that they remain human in spite of everything. . . . They think of us as individuals . . . they take a personal interest."

The day orderlies had now come on duty and were polishing the floor in their brown canvas shoes.

"What sort of a bloke is that tall beggar?" said No. 34. "Think he looks as if he'd buy me some greengages?"

"Better ask Wee Willy," I said.

"Hey," called out No. 34. "Orderly, get us some greengages to-day; a franc's worth."

"All right, chum," said the orderly without arresting the steady slide of his polisher. "You'll get your greengages all right."

"A say, Orderly," called out Happy the Canadian from the bed opposite, "think the doctor 'll mark me for Blighty to-day?"

"All right, chum," said the orderly as before; "you'll get to Blighty all right."

"Try them after dinner," I said to No. 34. "It's too early in the morning."

Breakfast came along and the night Sister passed us as she went off duty. She nodded to us as she went past. She carried a little woollen coat over her arm.

At breakfast No. 34 found an address on his egg and asked us all whether he thought he ought to answer it or not. "It don't seem right to eat the egg and not obey the instructions on the lid. 'Amy Smith . . . Wesley Cottage. . . . Do write. . . .'"

The egg was eaten but not answered.

"Does he remember about his leg?" I wondered.

After breakfast the day Sister came up the ward saying "Morning" to every one as she passed. When she reached the end of the ward near the nurses' bunk she called out to one of the orderlies in a shrill voice: "Rumsden, be quick and get the gramophone; it's our day for it, don't you remember? quick, or we'll lose it; and then I want you to get me that irrigator from the Dispensary—hurry—fly. . . ."

"All right, Sister," said Rumsden, the nursing orderly, from under a bed. "Hany one would think I was a gentleman of leisure."

"Fly," repeated the Sister, arranging the dressings on the trolley and looking at herself in a concealed mirror at the same time. Then she went into the scullery and came out again. Her voice penetrated everywhere. The work of the

ward accelerated and went forward in a series of little storms.

The thought of the morning's dressing began to darken me.

On a shelf opposite there was a box with the words *Michals Stow Away* written upon its side. "What the hell does *Michals Stow Away* mean?" I thought.

Of the two periods—the night and the day—into which my life was divided, I preferred the night when that silent woman walked up and down and when so many meaningless objects were hidden from sight.

The gramophone was brought in and a series of rapid tunes were played. The Sister said she knew some people didn't care for it, but they were not to be selfish and prevent others from enjoying themselves. Her arguments were unanswerable. "What about that poor devil at the end with a bit of shell in his brain?" I thought. "He'll have to learn to be unselfish too."

I longed suddenly for the sight of a friend. What were Bill, Mack, Chatham, doing at this moment? I felt intensely lonely.

"This is the meaning of ill-health," I thought. "Isolation. I and these others are no longer men. . . . We have failed to survive the struggle for existence. This war is a struggle for existence and we are the weak who have gone to the wall. . . . And how late the post is this morning."

I felt very sorry for myself and enjoyed the sensation. Better any sensation than none at all.

Then came a moment of sanity. The gramophone had stopped.

"It is well for once to be alone and helpless. It is well to depend for once on nothing but the bare level of human nature. Now you can test much. . . ."

The gramophone had stopped out of deference to the surgeon who had entered, wearing his white coat, and was now at the other end of the ward. The Sister perceived the fact immediately. She finished a slight wound she was dressing, told the patient it didn't hurt him because it couldn't, and sent an orderly flying. Then she walked quickly between the beds to her trolley of dressings, with arms stretched out, and issuing shrill orders.

"She'll never make a nurse," said Happy the Canadian.

"She'll make a matron, though," said Scotty; "they think no end of her here. Wait till you've been here long as I have, lad."

The surgeon was going to different beds, marking the bed boards. When he had finished marking them he put the board down on the bed in an absent-minded way. To some patients he made monosyllabic remarks; others he passed over in silence. His face always wore a portentously solemn expression for a young man, and was faultlessly shaved. He stood in the middle of the floor for a short time speaking to the Sister, whose eyes flitted about the ward as she spoke, then they both went up to No. 34's bed. The surgeon stood looking out of the window while the Sister

unrolled the bandages. He then bent over the leg and looked at it for a long time. Then last of all he looked at the patient.

He spoke slowly to No. 34, asking him simple questions. His solemn eyes looked as if once, long ago, they had been human and still had vague recollections of past uncertainties.

He was a scientific child.

Then another surgeon came up, not wearing a white coat, and they looked at the leg together. They seemed to communicate to each other without words. The leg was broken above the knee, and above and below were wounds in various stages of sepsis.

No. 34 was glancing about with an expression half comic, half worried.

"The wounds are very dirty," said the solemn one at length. The other surgeon walked away quickly.

"There's trousers, puttees, and outfits inside 'em," said No. 34.

The surgeon did not smile, but looked at the patient a moment longer than necessary.

Then he looked again for a long time at the wounds in silence.

"I can't promise to save the leg," he said at last.

Silence.

"Much better have it off."

"What's the use of one leg to me, with my job?"

"We can't set the bone owing to the state of your wound."

But No. 34 would not have his leg off. He didn't

really think about it at all. He knew very well he wouldn't. He was not aware of the fact that the highest mortality from wounds occurred in cases of broken thigh-bones, even without such complications as his own. "He doesn't know," I thought, "and I shan't tell him. And even if I did it would make no difference."

The surgeon said, "We will do our best for you," and as he said so, his blind face tried to express something but failed. But as if to atone, he looked again at No. 34 longer than was necessary. For a moment I felt sorrier for him than for the patient. He turned to the Sister and told her to get some Caryll tubes ready, and that he would return presently and do the dressing himself.

Then he went out of the ward.

"*He's* a cheerful bloke," said No. 34, who was now having his bed re-arranged, and a fracture mattress put under him. "Sister," he continued, "what's the use of one leg to me on my job, digging, pipe-laying, and knocking round?"

The Sister laughed, "Ha, ha, ha," and re-arranged the loops of hair she showed under her cap. She added, "I should do what the doctor says."

"But I was in hospital once before and I got well in a week."

"What with?" I asked.

"What with? Operation for appendicitis . . . in Sydney Hospital. I was up in a week, and we had a rough house in the ward. . . . I went weight-lifting in ten days."

The Sister put the finishing touches to his bed

and removed the section of mattress under his splint, in preparation for the dressing.

"Hey, Sister. . . . Where the devil's she taking my mattress to?"

"You'll be all right," said the nursing orderly. "You'll be a pet case. They'll take an interest in you."

"Interest! Great nuggets! They do take an interest in you here—take away half your mattress, offer to cut your leg off, and then tell you to make yourself comfortable."

"Better nuggets here than up at Pozières," said the quiet Australian on my left.

"Where did you do your digging then?"

The Sister had meanwhile gone forward, with her trolley table and retinue of orderly and Red Cross nurse, to the bed of Pat the Irish Fusilier. She stood holding a syringe with sterile hands while the orderly lifted the patient by means of the special pulleys on his bed. Pat began to call out long before he felt anything. "Oh me—oh me, Sister—I'll not be pulled up and down this way like a piece of meat on a lift. . . . Oh me . . . oh me."

We laughed and continued our talk, but his wails made an unpleasant impression. The Sister scolded him well and continued her work.

"He shouts about nothing," said a man opposite.

"*She* doesn't care—if she does hurt him," said Scotty.

"One fool torturing another—and she'll come to me next," I thought.

"Oh me. . . . Ah me. . . . Oh me," went the voice.

Will the morning never come to an end?

She came back along the ward and stopped opposite my bed, while she called out to the orderly. The Red Cross nurse came after her pushing the trolley of dressings, and when she stopped she looked nervously at the Sister.

"Quick," said the Sister, "we'll do Sergeant next. Fetch the saline."

A patient opposite was nursing his bed-board and gazing at it with delight. "Sister," he cried, "I'm for Blighty. He's marked me England B."

She arranged the irrigator over my leg, and replied to him vivaciously: "You'll be all right then. You'll go to-morrow. Mind you write something in my album."

I looked at her and said to myself hopefully, "She doesn't mean to hurt."

The gramophone began again.

"Don't be too strong-minded, Sister," I said. But she looked at me without understanding.

The saline started to flow and she held the nozzle in position. "Wee Willy," she called. "Fetch my album out of the bunk and give it to No. 10."

The world grew grey with pain.

"I've got it, Sister," called out Wee Willy.

The gramophone was repeating an idiotic screaming song that we had already heard three times that morning. Cries came through the window from the next ward; they always came at

this time of the morning from some unknown patient. They were not complainings or protests; they were the cries of an animal in pain, and the voice of the gramophone could not drown them.

Michals Stow Away said the box on the shelf opposite, and my brain repeated the words *Michals Stow Away—Michals Stow Away.* This is madness—God, for something sweet and sane to look at! Fools torturing fools—this is the only meaning in life—anonymous suffering with a touch of the grotesque. . . ."

"Sergeant," said a voice, "whatever *is* the matter?" I caught a glimpse of the Sister's face with her expressionless china-blue eyes, as through a mist; then she went up the ward a few steps, calling out to the orderly about patients' dinners.

I had forgotten that it was not her fault at all that I was in pain. I hated and feared her.

The gramophone continued, the cries through the wall answered my own pain, and *Michals Stow Away* waited for me opposite when I should open my eyes.

But the morning's comedy was not over.

When I opened my eyes again the solemn surgeon had returned to the ward and was engaged upon dressing No. 34 in the next bed. The dressing took a long time and the Sister stood by, handing instruments and holding gauze and plugging. The nursing orderly also bent over the bed in an uncomfortable position holding the leg.

The surgeon did not speak. From my bed, without caring to notice them, I heard movements and the occasional sigh of the orderly whose back was beginning to ache.

Once I looked at No. 34. He was probably suffering more than I had done, but he made no sign. I wondered what *he* thought on these occasions.

Sometimes he drew in his breath through his teeth. He wore that look as of an extinct volcano for a long while, then he seemed to come to himself and made a sign of pain. The Sister, who was not in awe of the surgeon, cast her eyes about and laughed a little. No. 34 gave her a sharp glance, but he made no further sign after that.

The surgeon worked very carefully and deliberately. The orderly was right—he had taken an interest in this case, and he continued to take an interest. The patient eventually owed to him both his life and his leg.

But this was only the beginning of things, and the state of that leg would then have scared any one but such a surgeon. He handled and scrutinised the Caryll tubes and the syringes as if time did not exist. His face was that of a child playing with serious toys.

But at last the dressing was done and he went away.

Then it was that No. 34 looked very gravely at the Sister and said, " Sister, I shall never marry a hospital nurse."

There was silence in the ward and every one in

the neighbouring beds heard the words. We all laughed at first, but No. 34 was serious.

The Sister was taken aback. "What—why ever——"

"You laughed at me just now when my leg hurt."

"Laughed—I was——"

"No, I shall never marry a hospital nurse. Suppose I broke my arm and my wife laughed at me?"

She began to laugh, but stopped. We were all as much taken by surprise as she was.

"I—I was only trying to cheer you up," but with his eyes upon her she knew it was not true.

"I don't care. I shall never marry a hospital nurse."

I was amazed to see that she did not resent him. Yet it was nothing less than his ultimate criticism of a woman; and this she perceived. She did not retaliate, but walked away, and returned continually to his bed, asking him, "But why——?"

In her china-blue eyes there was for once a puzzled expression. Her clipped mind fluttered like a bird in a snare.

I thought, "It's no use—his words have achieved what no irony, pleading, or patience could have achieved—with what intelligence you have you will think and think about it, and talk about it, and tell other women about it. But you will never forget."

Yet I liked her for not resenting him. Long after she made him write something for her in her album.

CHAPTER XII

HOMO LOQUITUR

"I love to feel where words come from."
WOOLMAN.

THE morning's ordeal in the ward was followed as a rule by a comparative peacefulness after the midday dinner. The Sister, before going off duty at two o'clock, had ordered the gramophone to cease for an hour or two, because the man with a piece of shell in his brain had contrived to fall asleep.

The glass doors had been opened, and a warm July breeze from French fields and gardens entered the ward.

For some time I watched the flies at their antics below the tie beam of the roof, darting and clustering hither and thither. Then I realised that I was listening to the voice of Pat, the Irish Fusilier, and that others were listening. Only when the ward was quiet, as now, could he be heard speaking in an ordinary voice. He always lay on his back, so that we never saw his face properly, and he addressed his conversation to the ceiling.

"You may know," he said, "that the best stout in the world is Guinness's, and it's made in Dublin."

"Guinness's is good stuff," said Happy the Canadian, "and it'll mix with whisky."

"And d'ye know why it's so good?" continued the voice from Pat's bed; "I'll tell ye. It's because it's made of canal water. It's the canals of Dublin are considered such fine water for brewin'."

But here something occurred to distract our attention. Heads were raised from pillows, and glances were directed up the ward to an individual who had made his appearance and had begun a slow progress from bed to bed.

With some patients he spent a long time; with others he appeared to speak for a moment only.

"Who was he?" we asked.

Then a rumour came from pillow to pillow that "he was asking each patient if he had been confirmed."

"Confirmed? What's that?" asked Happy of the Scot in the next bed.

"Ask a C. of E. I'm the other religion when these blighters come round," said Scotty.

"Blokes come round askin' this, that and the other. . . . I dunno——" commented a patient who held a Japanese parasol between himself and the sun.

Then we suddenly lost all interest in the incident and continued to listen to Pat. He was saying—

"I tell ye it's the canal water they use and no other. Ask any fella from Dublin. It's the most convaynient to use, and they use it. And I'll tell ye this, that once they began for to usurp the old canal boats with new boats that were motor-boats,

and the oil got into the canal and spoilt the water. . . . I'm tellin' ye the truth. . . . And then there was the divil to pay, and Guinness's had hundreds of barrels returned . . . well, there was a little revolution in Dublin about it."

"And what did they do?" asked some one.

"Well, they took off the new boats off the canal and used the old ones. They had to. . . . There was some people said Guinness's stout was the will o' God."

We all laughed at this.

"My life, he's a rum bloke, ain't he?" said the Australian in the bed next to mine, who was always called No. 34.

"He's barmy," said a quiet Englishman in the bed next to Pat.

"A bloody unexpected bloke," said No. 34. "I likes them."

"Well," said Scotty opposite, "if Guinness's stout is the will o' God, I'll take to releegion." And for many of us that was the only occasion on which we saw Scotty smile. His name was Drury, but he was always called Scotty.

"You're right, Pat," shouted some one, "there's no living without beer."

Any further remarks from Pat's bed were drowned by the three Australians, who under a sudden inspiration began to speak together about their own country.

I was glad of this, and felt that one of those moods had fallen upon us in which men will beguile themselves with their own minds.

The fatherly Australian in the bed opposite began to describe the small farm he had left in charge of his partner. He mentioned facts only, but I seemed to get a picture from his words. He had not been as badly wounded as most of us, and his energy persuaded us unconsciously as we listened. The other two Australians threw in remarks from time to time.

He seemed to be looking at a wide, flat, rather parched country shaded at intervals by tall trees under which the sheep gathered for shade. Big fences ran in straight lines to the horizon, and cattle stood lazily by the banks of a river. Through the trees he saw his own house; and he mentioned the number of horses in his stables.

"Of course," said he, "we think you don't know what living is over here. We have the best cream and butter of our own making, and keep our best stock for our own meat. Meat meals three times a day with puddings and pies."

"Pumpkin pie!" murmured the Australian on my left dreamily.

"... And there's no Australian 'll eat frozen meat. ... You have to do the boys well or they'll leave you. ...

"Yes, I'd advise any young chap who'll work to come out. ... And the money's in the land. ...

"I've a young chap now running my farm; he learnt his job under me, and now we share. If I sell out after the war and go to Tasmania planting bananas, he'll have it all if he wants it."

For the first time in my life I felt interested in

Australia. Lying in my bed I couldn't help thinking about that "young chap" who had stayed at home. A patient from the other side of the speaker's bed echoed my thought.

"So the young chap stayed and you joined up?"

"Yes—I don't know, I wanted a bit of a change. And he was keen on the work." Then he added, "There's not so much of your young and old out there."

"There's a lot to be said for Australia," I thought.

My friend No. 34 had now taken up the conversation, and glanced in his restless way up and down the ward as he spoke. "I don't know your Victoria country—not much," he said; "I've been up and down in Northern Territory and in Weste'n Austraily. . . . By Jee, if you're a good cook up there the dollars 'll roll in. . . ."

"And there's one thing—you never know who you're goin' to knock against."

"You know Kalgouri?" asked the Australian on the other side of me.

"Yes. D'you know it? . . . I was goin' to say . . . You know the hotel with the penny-in-the-slot piano?"

"Yes—I know it."

"Eh . . . we were having a bit of a night there. Not a rough house, ye know. . . . And there was a little bloke sittin' there I never seen before. We didn't know who he was. He seemed a bit down at heels and wearing an old pair of togs—so I started

talkin' to him. . . . I thought he looked lonely. We had drinks all round; we got chums . . . see? And this chap . . . after a bit, he said he'd pay for some drinks . . . and he was worth half a million dollars. A nice quiet little bloke he was. He told us about it. He owned a couple of little gold mines . . . said he'd had a bit of a surprise. Hadn't found 'em out more than a month. And we'd chummed up with him 'cause we thought he was down on his luck. It was through him I got a ten-dollar a day job afterwards."

"You never know your luck, and that's a fact," said No. 33. "I remember once I met a Yank in Sydney—said he'd come to Sydney to learn the English accent. . . ." But this promising story was cut short by Scotty, who half raised himself in bed and interposed a passionate utterance.

"Well, how you chaps could 'a been such thundering fools as to leave your farms and your ten dollars a day and cross half the world to come to this—*to this*"—and he waved a clenched fist at the roof of the ward.

"Well, what about me?" shouted Happy the Canadian, apparently waking from a doze. "What about me? Walked eight hundred bloody miles to enlist."

We all gasped at this. "Eight hundred miles!" some one said incredulously.

"Yes, eight hundred miles; and if ye don't believe me, look at the map of Alaska and see how else I could get from Nome to Dawson City while the rivers were frozen. There was a hundred and

twenty of us altogether came from Alaska. It's States territory, but they're most Canadians up there. Me and my six brothers walked it and dragged a little sledge with our packs. The trail was good and hard."

"What do you find to do up in that country?" asked the fatherly Australian.

"All sorts," said Happy.

"Done any digging?" asked No. 34.

"Nope," said Happy. "My old man has a post for the Hudson Bay Company. We all helped him and did a bit on our own if we wanted. One time I'd go after a bear. Or do a bit of dog driving. But I was most round the old man's place. There's a lot to learn about skins. Now he has only my four sisters to help him, and one with a kid. There was seven of us came away when we heard about the war. Now there's one killed and three of us wounded beside myself."

"What sort of a country is it?" asked No. 34.

"You'd not like it," said Happy, rather defiantly. Then added in a loud voice, "There's not many likes it—not been born there. It's mostly winter, but by God when the summer does come! . . . Everything bursts out on you . . . trees and bloody big flowers . . . and all the animals go daft."

"Nine months' winter wouldn't suit me," said the fatherly Australian. "Some of our chaps never seen snow till they come to these parts. I'd only seen it once myself."

"Snow. . . . I'd give ye snow," said Happy.

Then in the hot July afternoon he raised his voice as though some spirit was speaking through him, and gave to us his home in a few incommunicable bursts of language. When he had finished he glared at me, to whom he appeared to address his remarks, but he left before me a vision into which his own rough, childish face fitted perfectly: the vision of a land silent but for the cracking of pine boughs under snow, overshadowed by unscaled mountains and washed by seas never free of ice.

At a point where three trails met was the trader's post, his home, and accessible only on his own feet. Here the trappers came with their skins, and great bargaining was made over them. One of the log huts was filled with tinned meats, canisters of coffee, and ready-made clothes hanging from the ceiling. These the trappers took away in exchange. In another log hut the skins were sorted and dried.

In the summer months trees were sawn and stacked for the winter, while the flowers sprang and died and birds sang all day long. But in September, when the first snow fell and ridged the logs of the huts, the blacksmith's hammer rang on the runners of new sledges, and at the sound the husky dogs stole back to the settlement from the woods and from their summer mates the wolves.

"Guess you'll call it an uncivilised country," said Happy after a pause, "but if I could get back to it I'd not leave it in a hurry. I've learnt some cruelty since coming to civilised parts. If I could once get back they'd not catch me in a hurry. I know a few little wild places."

No. 34 called out to him across the floor of the ward.

"By Jee, I know a spot or two in Northern Territory where they'd not find me. But I'd take a year to get there from here."

"Well, why did you enlist, Happy?" I asked.

The Canadian paused for a moment and then said—

"Because of the adventure."

"And what d'you think of the adventure?"

"It's the worst God-forsaken trip I've struck yet."

Then I asked No. 34 why he enlisted.

"I'm beggared if I know," he replied.

"Shall I tell ye why I enlisted?" said Scotty. "Because all the other loons did, and there's half the lads did the same for no better reason. I know better the noo."

"Know better than what?" But he was silent.

"Well, anyway," said a voice near by, "Fritz would have done us down if we hadn't enlisted."

"We're not afraid of Fritz in our country," said the fatherly Australian—"well, not before the war. There were others we were afraid of. It beats me sometimes why all our chaps enlisted."

Then after a moment's silence the thin Englishman, who had the bed next Pat, began to speak. He suffered a great deal of pain from a leg which the surgeon said might eventually have to come off, and during his dressings he always bit his blankets, but never uttered a sound. We all thought well of him, and were anxious to catch his

words. At first I could not hear what he was saying because of a staff clerk who came up the ward with squeaky shoes and went to a bed at the top of the ward. At last I heard.

" . . . We're all here in this ward, and we've had to pay the price one way or another, but why make ourselves out cheap? If chaps can speak plain, we can. I reckon the war had to come, and we enlisted because it were our duty."

But at this Scotty half rose on his elbow, and I noticed the parallel lines on his forehead due to continual pain.

" Well," he cried huskily, " if this flaming war is the will o' God, I'll die a bloody atheist. . . . You're right about speaking plain. . . . Christ! I can speak plain too. I ken weel I'm goin' to die. The last five in this bed have gone, and that's a fact, for I was in this ward before my last operation. Scotty's to ha' seven operations, lad, and die on the slab, I ken weel it's a fact. And he's had six. And mind here, if I get to heaven some one 'll get into trouble, for if there's a God I'll want to know why He's a pro-German. . . ."

" He's a fiery little bloke, ain't he? " said No. 34.

" I don't believe much in heaven myself," said the fatherly Australian.

" Austraily's good enough for me," said No. 33 on my left.

The Englishman had turned his eyes on Scotty. " No offence, Scotty," he said; " but there must be a heaven, my boy. This place isn't good enough."

I looked at him with interest. "He's a colonist, too," I thought. "A colonist in the spirit."

Scotty had been lying rather exhausted after his last outburst, but he now got an arm out from under the clothes and pointed to the little man who was making his slow pilgrimage from bed to bed. "It's these religious beggars I canna bide," he said. "What I want to know is, who was Jesus Christ, then, after all? I bet I've suffered more pain in this bed than He ever suffered."

"There was a chap near where I used to work," said No. 34, "who got shut up for saying he was Jesus Christ. He did. He went up to the sheriff and said, 'I'm Jesus Christ.' It's a fact. They shoved him in clink for it."

"It's no good talking like that, and it's not right," said the Englishman. But the voice of Pat could now be heard addressing the ceiling, and we listened to him with a sense of relief.

"Ah, Scotty and me are fed up with no chance of getting to Blighty. This Englishman here's a mild, faithful fellow. . . . I mind once I was that fed up. . . . It was a long while since. . . . I was that fed up in the barrack-room, one morning, that when the orderly officer came round and says, 'Any complaints?' I stepped out and says, 'I want a razor, sir, to cut me throat.'"

We all laughed.

"And what did the officer say?"

"I'll tell ye. The officer was a bloody big feller with bristlin' eyes. He called the room to

attention and sent for a razor and handed it to me himself and stood glaring at me."

"And what did you do?"

"I thought better of it. It was a fine razor and I kept it. But I've often . . . thought since I might have used it then . . . and done wisely."

"By God," said Scotty, "if an officer done that to me I'd ha' used it on the spot to spite him."

"It wasn't the officer I minded," said Pat; "we became friends after. I held it in me hands and felt the blade and I thought to meself, 'Shall I do it?' and I give the feller a long look. He knew then I'd do it as soon as not, for all I cared for him or the British Army. We were friends after, and I was his servant. He was killed a while since. . . ."

"There's a part of the trail where I come from," said Happy, "where if you camp for the night they say you wake up and want to hang yourself. It's a wild part, and the boys like to pass on beyond it if they can, but I've slept there good and warm myself and felt nothing. But you'll never get an Indian to sleep there."

Then I realised that this was a debate in which the speakers had only their lives for arguments.

"There's some of these officers have a good time," said some one.

"There's others beside officers," said Scotty: "there's lads at home working at munitions getting as much pay as a lieutenant-colonel."

"Of course," said the fatherly Australian, "our

officers ain't as high and mighty as yours. I'll give the devil his due, it's no bloody game being an officer in this war, though he can take it out of his N.C.O.s."

"By Jee," said Happy suddenly, "if an officer handed me a razor like that——"

"That's the Army, ain't it?" said No. 34, "each man taking it out of the rank below him. That's what I hate——"

"It's all right for the man at the top," said Scotty.

"I reckon not," said the Englishman; "some of these O.C.s don't have much of a time. One mistake and they're done."

"But they're not shot for it."

"They shoots themselves sometimes. Nay, we're all in the same boat in the Army. It's the war."

"It seems funny," I said, "we always seem to get as far as 'it's the war,' and no farther. But what's the war for? We're all here from every part of the world with plenty to complain about, yet don't know why we enlisted. . . . Well, Happy says he enlisted because of the adventure: and Scotty because his pals enlisted. But what made his pals and him enlist—that's what——"

"Because we were fu'," said Scotty. Whereupon every one laughed.

I gave up the brief attempt, hopeless as a hundred others before it. These men, my masters in experience and the practice of life, were children when they came to reflect. Freedom was the root and

medium of their lives, but the word was not on their lips. They all had this in common—they were unconscious of the powers that moved them, *apparently*. Some could get hold of outside ideas, but it seemed that the idea of ourselves we could not grasp.

Meanwhile the little man, who was making his pilgrimage from bed to bed, had drawn nearer. We watched him now with agreeable curiosity. He wore a pea-soup-coloured overcoat, although the time of year was July, with a scarf and a bowler hat. He carried a book in his hand. He withdrew himself from each patient in turn, and then went bashfully but resolutely up to the next. But the rumour about the nature of his mission was a mistake. We learned on his near approach that he represented some benevolent board who had undertaken to inquire at the hospitals for missing soldiers. Without asking a patient's name, he inquired his regiment and battalion and then referred to his book to see if any of the list of missing belonged to the same. If so, he asked the patient if he knew the missing man, if he knew where he was last seen in the field, or if he had heard any rumours of him.

Such inquiries are useful. Men of the same unit often have a curious knowledge of each other's doings, sometimes amounting to an instinct, which is not lost on the battlefield. Also they seldom forget what knowledge of the kind they once possess.

The little man had passed Pat, who had given him a fine story of a man of the right name but

of the wrong Division. Now he went up to the Englishman, who had no information to give him. Next in the line was a patient who slept nearly all day long and who seldom spoke a word. He was asleep now, and the little man having glanced at him withdrew on tiptoe. Next came Happy, who sat up and shouted at him, "Umteenth Canadian Battalion." The little man referred to his list. "I am afraid," said he—"I am afraid—I have none of that unit on my—on my list."

"And a good job too," said Happy, and lay down again.

Next came Scotty, who was lying with closed eyes. The little man went up to him and they appeared to commune together. Apparently there were several of Scotty's battalion to inquire about. The little man took out a note-book and began writing. For some unknown reason we watched the pair with interest. Then he left Scotty's bed, but hesitated and returned: and we heard Scotty say—

"Ye can add another piece of information to *thon*. Ye can add that the man's dead."

The little man wrote it down obediently, and then said, "How—how do you know?"

"Never mind why I know," said Scotty.

The little man hesitated, and then said again, "Can I have your name, please, in case the relatives of the—man care to write to you?"

"Relatives?" said Scotty. He was now almost sitting upright, staring at the little man. But he sank back on his pillows and said, "Drury—my name's Drury too."

The little man stared at him, evidently thinking he was wandering, then hurried on to the next bed.

And, indeed, when Scotty began speaking again, I also thought he was wandering. But he was not.

" Relatives. . . . Relatives. . . . Once there were relatives enough to hear of the death of a Drury . . . many would hear and weep, and many would hear and rejoice. . . . Ma feyther's feyther had the longest funeral in Paisley. He had the siller, but ma feyther poured it all awa' against the wall. . . ."

Then he lifted his head and stared at me.

" Did ye hear yon wee fella come asking me about ma ain brother? . . . Missing, they call him, but I ken he's dead. He's pushing up daisies the noo, and I'll be doing the same before long, and that'll be the three of us. Before this blasted war ma mother had three sons. She died after the last joined up a year sin'. Jamie was killed at Loos, and the man that tells me Jock's alive the day is a liar. . . .

" A ken weel a'm the last of ma feyther's family.

" They thought Jock was taken prisoner when he was left in the wire, one day we raided Fritz's front line. They sent a search party out for him, but I'd been there before them. He was deed, and I dragged him to a wee shell-hole and put earth on him. But I put my ain field-dressing over 's face. There's some afeered of no-man's-land. I liked it. I felt free there. I went for a week by nicht and scuffled earth over him, and

lay close. I got my ain wounds beside him, and wanted to bide with him, but they took me awa'.

"But I dinna tell any speirin folk about *him*."

Scotty then spoke of what had once been his home, as a dying man speaks. A northern suburb of Glasgow stretches its modern stone-built houses, its shops and factories, over what had once been green fields and stretches of moor dotted with farm-towns. To the north, on a clear day, can be seen the Western Highlands, and to the south the smoke of factory chimneys blowing over Clyde-water, and through the masts of ocean-going ships. As Scotty spoke he seemed to identify himself with his country as completely as the previous speakers had done. His land, like his mind, had been marred and overlaid, but preserved a wildness and a grandeur of its own, so that I could not help thinking of the land Happy had described, the land of the next bed.

But to Scotty's bed belonged something not perceived in the others. Pain, despair and personal loss set him at the moment above the rest of us. But he was at all times more varied and more tragic. He had with him the consciousness of the past, of turbulent ancestors and the misgivings of an intellectual race behind a tortured and faithless mind.

While Scotty was speaking, the V.A.D. nurse left in charge of the ward went to one of the beds and began cleaning the bedstead with a duster and some spirits. At first my eyes rested upon her unconsciously.

She worked and rubbed industriously; to be

left in charge of the ward was doubtless a stimulus to work. She bent down and passed the duster into every nook and cranny of the wire mattress. The sun shone on her strong healthy figure and on her swift unconscious movements. Once she lifted her head impatiently and jerked back the flaps of her cap, then she stooped again and continued her work. My eyes followed her movements. We knew she had come from a wealthy home. "She, too," I thought, "is having her adventures." She was so unlike every other person whom we had been considering that her presence suddenly seemed something wonderful and astonishing. We liked the V.A.D. nurses, and, moreover, we often felt that they alone in the other camp secretly sympathised with us.

Then a thought struck me. "She, too, is on our side . . . perhaps."

Scotty's voice ceased, and I realised in a moment that I had forgotten about the dying and protesting man.

But others had heard him with deep, unquestioning sympathy.

"So you're the last, Scotty?" called out No. 34. "That's hard luck."

Scotty did not reply for a moment, and then said—

"And to die among strangers."

"If this war don't do something, it's the bloodiest joke I've struck," said No. 34.

"They say this war'll end war, but I don't know," said the fatherly Australian.

"Who says so?" said Scotty; "I say we've suffered our lot. Let others suffer."

"That's not right." It was the voice of many minds.

"No," said the fatherly Australian. "We're in for the dirty work. Let's get it done while we're about it, and leave a cleaner job for others."

"But if we don't know what the job is," I said. "If we don't know why we enlisted or what's to come of it."

"Well, I'll tell you why I enlisted. I haven't told you my story yet," said a voice.

We looked to the left. The man speaking was the Englishman. His voice was weak at first, but grew stronger as he continued.

"It was owing to my wife. You've all been talkin', but you've not mentioned your wives yet. Well, it was owing to her, and I'm not ashamed of it.

"When the war started she was bad with consumption, and I was that put about on her account I had no thought for aught else.

"But she thought a deal about it.

"Our home was near Manchester, and her father he was a local preacher at Preston, and we used to go to Preston—see—for our week's holiday at the end of September—well, the last week in September.

"Mind, there'd been a lot of my pals joined up, and some of 'em had said to me, they'd said, 'Why don't ye join up with the lads, Tom?' There was a lot went from Lancashire in the early days.

"But, as I say, I were that put about, with her

that bad, I paid no heed to them; but I must have had it on my mind, I reckon.

" But anyway I made up my mind I'd have my holiday with the missus, war or no war, and I'm glad I had, too. We went all the way from Manchester to Preston on top of a tram. The doctor at the Infirmary said she didn't ought to travel by train because of not getting the air—see—with her having consumption; so we went all the way to Preston on top of a tram.

" By—she did enjoy it, too, and so did Jack—he's the nipper—well, he's a lad now.

" I wrapped her up warm, and we took near three days to do it, by easy stages. On top all the way and the weather were champion. Well, the doctor said afterwards it added a year to her life.

" Well, we slept at a temperance hotel at Bolton one night, and at Blackburn the next, and took tram in t' morning. Took our sandwiches with us. . . . You can see the country fine that way, too. Missus she kept asking—

" ' Tom,' she'd ask, ' what's yon hill over there? ' or ' I believe I can see the sea.'

" There's one place you come to over Preston. By! the view's champion. You can see right away along the coast, and away to Lancaster and Carnforth.

" Well, it was on that ride I made up my mind to join. But for all that I couldn't abear leaving her. But the missus, she'd been thinkin' about it all along. I remember well her words, though I can't just say whereabouts we were. The car

had stopped for a bit, and Jack—that's the nipper—was hanging over the rail looking at one thing and another, and she had hold of his coat lest he should fall. I remember she turned to me and said, 'You're not to study me, Tom,' she said. 'Happen if you go, then Jack'll not have to go when he's a big lad.' They were her words, and I remember them sure as I'm in this bed.

"After our holiday I joined up, and she stayed with her folks at Preston. The lad's living there now."

"I've a nipper myself," said No. 33 across the ward, at which the fatherly Australian held up three fingers to signify he had that number. The Englishman's voice continued—

"Well, I reckon this war's for them, for him. I reckon his mother saw that—then. That's why I say it was all owing to her. I've had plenty of time to study things out lying here. But it's hard to do the thinking and the fighting. This war's not got to be a bloody joke. 'Cause I've been knocked about I don't want to see him done the same. Not him nor others. I want better things for him. . . .

"If he wants to go to Australia or Canada I'll not stand in his way, because I know chaps like you come from there, and I'll say it straight, I'm glad I've met you. But wherever he goes I want him to have his chance. If he has a mind for study and wants to go to big towns, I don't care where—England, France, Germany; I want him to go and hear no talk of war, and have his fair chance, though

happen he'll come home to choose his lass. My Christ! I've been a slave—a slave, compared with what I want him to be."

The speaker ceased. I looked at the man, at his pale face now rather flushed, and recalled all he was reported to have suffered. I had often watched him biting his blanket during dressings, and I knew the chances of his death were no less than those of Scotty's.

Now I saw him in a new light.

Then the Australian, No. 34, burst in suddenly, "Well, and I'll tell you one thing *I've* learnt on this joint. I'm not set on pegging out like Scotty, and I've no kids of my own—none I knows of—not yet; but I've learnt one thing, I want my own country again, my own life, and to be free."

"But that's what we all want," I cried. "All of us here and in every country at war. . . . That's why we all enlisted—for our own lives to be free."

"Live and let live, that's it," said No. 34.

"Ay, but some has to learn to live and some to let live," said the fatherly Australian, "that's where it is."

"That means," I said, "that freedom means an agreement." I spoke as much for myself as to others; but I caught the Englishman's eye, and he nodded earnestly.

"And that's what we're learning," he said; "that's what the war's for. People must understand each other as *we* understand each other here and now . . . come from all over the world."

He paused and looked over to Scotty as though challenging him. Scotty's reply was unexpected.

"It's no use argufying wi' fools that believe in God—in God and this war."

"It's not the war, Scotty; there'll always be chaps like you. . . ." The Englishman was looking at Scotty with pain in his eyes.

"Freedom means an agreement," I repeated desperately, trying to draw his eyes away from Scotty. At last he looked across at me.

"And for the great freedom," I said—"the great agreement."

He nodded. But he was evidently exhausted: he fell back on his pillows almost immediately. Then we were distracted by a burst of laughter and conversation from the other end of the ward. The general duty orderly passed between the beds carrying a white bucket, full of tea. He seemed to carry away with him all our prayers, desires and anticipations. When he had passed, No. 83 was again trying to tell his story about the Yank who said he'd gone to Sydney to learn the English accent.

I recalled what the Englishman had said about it being hard to do both the fighting and the thinking.

THE END

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